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# JEPHTHAH'S DAUGHTER

BY

JANE H. SPETTIGUE

AUTHOR OF

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# JEPHTHAH'S DAUGHTER.

## CHAPTER XVI.

### CROSS PURPOSES.

"And you knew not that I was your sister. What a strange, wild, forward young person you must have thought me—mixing myself in the fortunes of a stranger whom I had only once spoken to."

—REDGAUNTLET.

DAWN came, and Hester heard the crack of the ox-whip as the waggons rumbled off. Still the dancing went on; but Hester, who had quickly caught the sound of her brother's footfall, soon missed it in the dancing-room. "I suppose it is only some of the most energetic young Africanders who go on after daylight hath appeared," she thought.

One of the matrons soon rose, and, sending to her spouse to request that the horses might be in-spanned

as soon as they could see the roads, began to dress herself and her children for the drive home.

When coffee was brought in, there was brought too a message from Mr. Cairns asking when the girls would be ready to start, with the rider that they had better not leave it too late, as they would be obliged to stop again during the hottest hours of the day.

"We will be ready in half an hour," said Clare, without hesitation.

Hester was not sorry to move from her uncomfortable place, but she feared that in one short half-hour she might not even catch another glimpse of Edwin.

She appeared in the dining-room within the appointed time. Fortune here favoured Hester. Mrs. Davenant was there, and would not hear of their leaving until they had had breakfast, which was already on the table. They were scarcely seated before she found herself greeting Edwin with her happiest smile.

Bevil, who had entered at the same time, turned to Mr. Cairns and said—

"Turner has offered to start us a few miles on our journey, so we shall be going the same way as far as the cross-road above Glendarvon, and may as well make one party."

Mr. Cairns answered with a sound that might be taken for yes or no, as desired, but could hardly be construed into a cordial assent.

However, the horses were brought to the door together. Hester longed for Edwin to mount her once more. She knew that Mr. Cairns would leave it to the younger men to put Clare and herself on their horses, and of course Frank would go to Clare.

"I have left my whip on the sofa in the dining-room," she exclaimed, when she got to the garden gate. "Will you fetch it for me, Mr. Thurstan?" Then, quickly turning to Edwin, she said, "Don't you like my horse, Captain Carnsew? I think her head is beautiful."

"So it is. But I wonder you venture to ride her about this country with no companion but Miss Cairns," and he stooped to give her his hand. In a moment she was in the saddle.

"Thank you," she said to Bevil, as he gave her her whip, but she replied to her brother's remark when he was in the saddle. "Gazelle is quiet enough, although she does look spirited. Mr. Cairns got her for us, and people say he is a very good judge of horses. One thing I am certain of at least, I should never have the least fear of riding any horse that he consented to my being mounted upon. Besides, Clare and I are not at all helpless. I believe she can saddle a horse, and I can ride without a stirrup."

Hester had the keenest sense of enjoyment during the next half-hour that she ever remembered feeling.

Edwin began speaking of her horse in a tone which she knew expressed his real admiration; and from that they went to his horse, then to the kind of life he had led in the colony and the kind of life he thought he should lead in India—little personal details that were gems without price to her.

She was so taken up with the pleasure of the present moment, that when she found Mr. Cairns and Bevil Thurstan had reined up their horses, it was as though some one had thrown a glass of cold water in her face. The first instant she felt angry, the next a shiver of despair ran through her.

But she had courage enough left to say good-bye cheerfully, and then she suddenly realized, when Bevil drew up his horse by hers and held out his hand, that his going too was an aggravation of her woe. Her voice had been equal to the effort of taking leave of her brother; now the strain seemed too long, and it hesitated as she said, "I hope it is only good-bye till we come back from the sea?"

He, too, did not speak as composedly as usual; there was a slight touch of irritation in his voice as he answered, "I don't know how long you are going to stay yet." But the next minute he added, more pleasantly, "However, I think I shall probably be still in the neighbourhood when you return."

"If for ever, still for ever, fare thee well," said Hester, quite gravely, as the little party divided.

She looked towards Bevil as she said it, for somehow her acquaintance with him seemed to warrant the expression of feeling which she dared not utter directly to her brother—for whom, however, she told herself, she really meant her lament.

Yet, strange to say, it was Bevil who occupied her thoughts for the next five minutes, although she was dropping behind her veil the first tears she had shed for years in real misery at losing her brother again.

It vexed her that she was being dragged down to the sea just when she wanted to stay at home. Now, she thought, she could have chatted to Mr. Thurstan almost as much as she liked about her people, without any beating about the bush. She could have learnt what Mary's name was, and gained some idea at least of what her husband was like, and have talked about her father and Philip and her aunt, and, above all, Joan. Then came a rush of conflicting feelings. Perhaps Mr. Thurstan was going to marry Joan. He had certainly spoken of having been at Caervean on a visit just before he left England, and it was Edwin, not Phil, who had been his first friend, she fancied.

"I like him, I like him," she said to herself again and again; "and it would be something for me to know that I had seen and liked Joan's husband. And yet I don't hope that it is so. Why not, I wonder. I am quite sure I like him. Why do I

feel as if he was not exactly suited to Joan? Of course there is hardly any man living good enough for her—but it is not that. I feel as if he and I had a secret separate from Joan: it is absurd, but I do. No doubt it is only my feeling towards him, and he will tell her of the girl he and Edwin met in South Africa, and perhaps describe me to her."

Somehow Hester did not enjoy the idea. "But why should I think he will think me more worth mentioning than Edwin will? I have seen very little more of one here than of the other." She would rather have liked Edwin to talk to Joan of her.

The trio was a quiet one during the day's journey. Now and again Mr. Cairns would make some remark or ask some question about people he had noticed the night before, and Clare would reply. No word escaped him about either Bevil Thurstan or Edwin Carnsew. Hester was sure they had not failed to attract his attention, and felt, though she could not tell why, that he would not mention them because she was present.

She was silent, grudging each step her horse made when she thought that only a few hours since she had talked to and touched Edwin, from whom she was now divided by ever-increasing miles that would probably never lessen again.

In the middle of the day the party rested at the

house of a friend, and the hostess and the girls lay down for a couple of hours. The lady had not been at Groenbosch the night before, as her children had whooping-cough; so Clare's duty was to entertain her with an account of the evening, during which Hester fell asleep, and awoke when dinner-time came, much refreshed.

Then there was mile after mile of hot riding till the sun was nearly going down, and they reached the waggon which had just out-spanned for the night. It was settled that the girls should stay where they were, while Mr. Cairns should ride off to find shelter for himself and the horses for the night at the nearest house. Hester and Clare scrambled into the waggon to change their habits for dresses, and Mrs. Dunstan, who was seated at a little distance from the waggon, asked Mr. Cairns—

"Did you get away early?"

"Pretty fair," answered Mr. Cairns. "Poor devil! I couldn't help being a little sorry for him. He'd made up his mind so nicely to have a bit of a chat with her this morning, and arranged to ride on with us. But, 'man proposes,' &c. I knobbled him, and the English captain bagged the girl, and so we went with just thirty yards between them every step of the way. When I cantered Lucy cantered, when we walked she did. The fellow was awfully uneasy under it. A devil might be almost excused

for swearing when he's planned a thing to his fancy and yet it won't hit off exactly. That girl is a clever girl if she wants to work him up. She gave him no chance of coming near her to-day, but when they were going off out she comes with a quotation from Byron, or some other crack sentimental man, to him—for all the world saying, 'Though I've no objection to the new love, I've no wish to be off with the old.'"

"I wish it was all right," sighed Mrs. Dunstan.

"Oh ja; if wishes were horses, beggars would ride," said Mr. Cairns, dryly.

"I like him; he seems so pleasant," urged Mrs. Dunstan, weakly.

"Yes, he is a well-informed, sensible fellow; and, if he is all right, seems a fellow you might trust with a girl. But then, for anything we know, he may be an escaped convict."

"Oh, that isn't likely!"

"No, I don't think it is likely, but it is possible. Those kind of blackguards do slip out of the island and swell it about in other lands sometimes. Well, it is time I made tracks, if I don't want to have the horses out after sundown. Good-night."

"Come, girls," shouted Mrs. Cairns, as her husband rode off leading the two horses. "Who wants coffee? It is getting cold."

The children clustered round; Hester and Clare

jumped down, and Agnes came from the end of the waggon, where she had been sketching.

"Ach!" she exclaimed. "Now one has to scratch in the front-box for everything! I suppose I must get out some sausages!"

"Where is your nose?" asked her mother, laughing. "I have scratched, as you call it, already, and the sausages are cooked."

"Well that is a comfort," said Agnes, seating herself on the dissel-boom so as to make the front of the waggon a sort of table for her plate and cup.

"You and Lucy must be even more tired, Clare, than we are," said her mother to Clare.

"Of course we could take it in turns to lie down on the kartel, and sleep all through the day in the waggon."

"We rested three hours at the Christians' and had dinner there," said Clare. "I believe Lucy even went to sleep while I was talking to Mrs. Christian about last night—didn't you, Lucy?"

"Yes."

"Pleasure to me, duty to you," mentally commented Agnes, while Clare said—

"I feel all right now we are on some higher ground again, but down by that Fish River is just terrible. I believe I should get asthma if I stayed there a couple of days. It isn't so much that the heat seems to scorch you up, as that you don't seem to be able to draw your breath in it."

"Yes, it may be a very fine place for ostriches and Kafirs," said her mother, "but I don't know how people manage to live in it. It was a nice evening, Clare, last night, wasn't it? A few fresh people make a pleasant change."

"I enjoyed it very much," said Clare.

"I am tired of meeting just the same set," said Agnes. "There was the same old gathering of the clans about—father, mother, and the whole span from each farm."

"Our own among the number. But there were the Scotts from Cradock, and Dr. Trentham and his wife from Bedford, and two barristers from town, to say nothing of Mr. Thurstan and Captain Carnsew," protested Mrs. Cairns. "I don't know how many more you want!"

"Mense! But Captain Carnsew is a fine man, Clare."

"Doesn't he dance well, Clare?" said Hester, feeling herself bound to join in the conversation.

"Yes, very well."

"It is more than can be said for Mr. Scott, then," said Agnes. "He lets you keep slipping and slipping from him till at last I said to him, 'Mr. Scott, if you don't hold me closer we shall have some one dancing between us presently.' As to Mr. Thurstan and Captain Carnsew, I don't see that they were of much use to anybody but Lucy. Isn't anybody

going to say anything to her about it? I only know that if I had gone on as she did the waggon wouldn't be large enough to contain us for the fuss there would be."

"It isn't now," said Clare, trying to joke the matter off with Agnes.

"Oh, nonsense; don't pretend you don't know what I mean. I should have been told my conduct was disgusting, and nobody would know what I should do next; but there sits Lucy as if butter would not melt in her mouth, and nobody says a word."

"Why should they?" asked Mrs. Dunstan.

"Why should people ever talk to me then?—Clare, how many dances did you dance?"

"All but two till we left the room."

"And how many did you, Lucy?"

"All I was asked for," said Hester.

"Ach!" exclaimed Agnes, in a tone of disgust.

"What would you have advised me to do?" asked Hester. "Waltz round the room alone? or take the bold measure of asking some gentleman to do me the favour of joining me?"

"I have no patience with you! You know you might have danced every dance if you would. I heard two or three men asking where you were; but no man is going to squeeze himself through a prickly-pear fence to say 'How do you do?' to a girl if she is inside."

"There are generally ways of getting the other side of prickly-pears," said Hester, "without getting one's self stuck fuller of thorns than a porcupine."

"I should have thought one might have satisfied you, but I suppose nothing would but clutching the only two decent Britishers in the room. Mr. Thurstan was well enough when he was alone, but I suppose you could not resist the attraction of the uniform."

"Agnes," said Mrs. Cairns, "you are making a stupid of yourself."

"No one who knows anything of Lucy can think that fine feathers have any attraction for her," said Mrs. Dunstan.

Hester felt thoroughly angry for a minute. "Impotent rage simply eats my heart out," she thought, "so I will keep as cool as I can; and what is it, after all—only a mosquito bite." So she said, "I am not going to set up a defence. I suppose it would be no good my saying I had not been flirting."

"Most certainly not," returned Agnes. "I shouldn't mind; you might flirt your head off for anything I cared, but I don't see that it is fair that you should be let off scot-free, and I should have everybody down upon me if I just dance twice with the same man, or say ten words to him."

"Don't you know yet," said Hester, "that one man may steal a sheep where another mayn't look over a hedge?"

"It isn't fair."

"Fair! What is justice?" said Hester, wearily. Then—"Well, a storm in a teacup would be nothing compared to a quarrel between people travelling in the same waggon, so I think I will take a little walk while there is some light left. Rob, will you come with me? We will see if we can find any 'traveller's joy' for Clare in the kloof."

"Take care of the baboons," said Mrs. Cairns. "There are generally some about here. They might give you a pelting with stones."

"And don't go too far," added Mrs. Dunstan; "you might not find it easy to get back."

"I will not lose sight of the waggon tent," said Hester, "and then we shall be quite safe, sha'n't we?"

She and her companion, one of the Cairns boys, wandered into the kloof, where she soon found the beautiful white clematis that Clare called "traveller's joy," and bushes of umlanga covered with pale blue flowers and scarlet honeysuckle. There was no sign of life to be seen but the white tent of the waggon, which every now and then gleamed in the dying light. The road was shut in by hills, and no house was to be seen.

The wildness of the scene by which she was surrounded, and the luxuriousness of the flowers and shrubs, worked kindly upon Hester. Rob was busy

shooting at mousebirds with a catapult, dreaming that he could already rival Nimrod with it, and was only a few degrees behind a Transvaal Boer.

"I suppose I should have been content," reasoned Hester to herself, "if yesterday I had met Mr. Thurstan only, and he had said a hundred words about my people or home; and when I have had so much more than I even dreamt of hoping, I surely ought to be so. I thank Providence for the great comfort, and I will not be so stupid as to let the brightness of my joy be tarnished by a breath from Agnes."

Yet as she walked back towards the waggon she said to herself, "Why am I so absurdly touchy all at once about what anybody else says of me. I never cared a scrap before. I suppose to people who only looked at me, it might really seem as though I was flirting with Edwin." Then came an uncomfortable idea, distinctly felt but unexpressed even to herself, that she should not like everybody to think that she had been. Anyhow, she was sure enough that Edwin had not flirted with her. But had any one else? She rather shirked the question. The manner of the two men had been quite different, but she was loath to believe that either of them had flirted with her.

When she reached the waggon she found the beds made, and the younger children already hushed.

There was something of awe in the state of her feelings as she prepared to spend her first night out of doors. As she had come up from Port Elizabeth, it had seemed to her that to see the railway winding among a thousand hills all unscathed by plough or dwelling, was as incongruous as it would feel to set up a four-post bedstead in the Albert Hall, and attempt to use it as a bedroom. Now the same call of "What doest thou here?" was stirring in her heart. She crept to her place, which was next the indignant Agnes, who did not allow her indignation to prevent her making all the room she could for her neighbour. But Hester could not sleep. At first the novelty of the situation kept her awake. Then her ears became alive to the intense stillness around, which the short laughs and voices of the Kafirs at their fire only broke to make more audible. They too ceased after a while, and then the sense of isolation grew almost terrible. She put up her hand and grasped one of the lathes of the tent, that she might feel the slight canvas covering which was shutting out the stars from her sight.

She longed for some distant sound that should make her feel that the world had other inhabitants. Even the shout of a jackal would have been a relief. But none came—only now and then, when one of the oxen moved his head, a trek-chain would give a soft rattle, a suppressed sound close at hand that only

made the world seem all the bigger, and the isolation more complete.

She had passed so many years in monotonous indifference to her own actions and those of other people, that the keen interest that had been awakened in her now was almost overwhelming in its power of excitement. To have something to hope for and look forward to, to have anything in the immediate past to dwell on with lively pleasure, was too new and unexpected not to stir her deeply. So each word her brother had spoken was recalled, and the pleasure of each look he had given her felt again.

Presently one of the children awoke and wailed that he was cold. His mother dragged a rug off herself and tossed it underneath, but before he had time to cover himself with it he had changed his complaint.

"Malcolm," cried the mother, "be still. You will wake the other children."

"Toch! Ach! I'm so hot."

"Malcolm, be quiet, or I will give you a beating."

Vain threat. Malcolm knew as well as his mother did that it would take her ten minutes to get a light and scramble off her perch and haul him out of his corner in the lowest tier, to say nothing of turning the risk of the babies waking up into a certainty. So Malcolm fretted on, regardless of threats, entreaties, and groans. The night seemed endless.

At every fresh outburst Agnes gave an impatient kick, and Hester momentarily expected an infant's shrill cry to rise from some corner; but they were spared this—spending the whole day out of doors had so tired the two youngest that they slept soundly through it all. Just before dawn Malcolm's silence told that he too was not able to keep himself awake longer. Then Hester dozed off, but scarcely had she lost consciousness when the in-spanning of the oxen roused her again.

For the next two hours she had enough to do to prevent herself from being bruised black and blue. She pounded Agnes, and Agnes pounded her, and whenever the oxen went fast she longed for them to go slower that she might have a little more control over her body; then when they went slowly she longed for them to go faster, that the suffering might not be longer drawn than must be.

When the waggon stopped there was at once a great bustle of dressing. Hester waited quietly till nearly all were ready, that she might have a little more privacy and space. On getting down from the waggon a tin dish of very uninviting-looking water, that had been fetched from a neighbouring dam, was offered to her to wash in.

"It is not dirty, it is only the colour of the soil," said Clare, on seeing her hesitate to use it.

"The surface has the hue of clay," thought

Hester. For a minute she wondered if she should not be streaked with sediment after using it, but as there was no choice she boldly took it, and found that if not cleansing it was at least refreshing. But she found herself getting a little shiver now and then in the hot wind, and she could eat no breakfast, though her cup of hot coffee revived her a good deal.

She was glad to see Mr. Cairns come with the horses.

As the day after she first left Caervean everything that had happened before was thrown into a perspective, very distant, though perhaps clear, so now the sight she had had of Edwin seemed a thing of past date altogether.

When Mr. Cairns said, "It's going to be a sneezing day; wouldn't you rather have the shelter of the waggon?" she answered, "I would rather keep to my horse till I drop off than go in the waggon."

However, as the horses were being taken to water just before they were to be saddled, they galloped off back along the road they had come. Two Kafirs started in pursuit at once, but the mandate went forth—

"You girls had better go on with the waggon, then you will be sure anyway of food and a night's lodging. It is likely enough that those brutes will run all the way home, then they can't be back again till to-morrow."

This dismal suggestion, however, was not realized, for a couple of hours later, as the oxen were plodding along the dusty way, the "Baas" was perceived coming with the three horses as fast as they could gallop, giving them a run for his pleasure since they had taken one for their own.

Then came several hours' riding upon the glaring highway, which seemed to fascinate Hester's gaze, and, however much she might determine to look at sky or distance, always drew her eyes back to the white heat of the winding track. When night fell the girls were passed over to the waggon again. To-night the children were all quiet, and slept as though an earthquake would not wake them.

A thunderstorm came on, and the noise seemed determined to crash the waggon into splinters, while the rain poured pitilessly down. Even when it ceased a tree close by kept dropping, dropping on the tent just over Hester's head. "I can fancy that I am in my grave," she shivered, "with the rain coming down upon me; it drops into my brain."

A great dread was creeping over her. She had often thought of death as a relief and an ending of endurance, but the prospect of illness had never come home to her before, and now she trembled at it. In vain she strove to calm herself; in vain tried to shut out thought and get to sleep. The next evening Mrs. Dunstan, concerned at her worn-

out appearance, persuaded Mr. Cairns to get to an hotel with the two girls. Hester thought she had never known a bed so comfortable, and got some rest for mind and body.

"We shall soon be able to see the sea," said Clare next morning, as they mounted a hill. The horses seemed to feel the exhilarating effect of the air, and both Clare and Hester had some trouble to keep their steeds to the sober walk or canter that Mr. Cairns approved of.

"At last!" sighed Hester, when a broad expanse of the Indian Ocean was spread suddenly beneath her.

"There is our house," said Clare, pointing out one of the cottages that were dotted among the sandhills.

## CHAPTER XVII.

### REMORSE.

"I little thought, ere life should end,
That it would be my lot to spend
Christmas beneath the Southern Cross.
How strange, while sombre winter fills
The dear old home with frost and snow,
To see the summer sunset glow
Redly among these grand old hills."



ESTER did her share that night towards unpacking and putting the house in order, in spite of Mrs. Dunstan's requests that she would not exert herself; but with the necessity for action the power also seemed to go, and the next morning, although she struggled into her clothes, she made no effort to leave the house.

Several days passed in the same way; sometimes

she would be able to get to the dining-room at meal-times, at others she could not rise. A dread would sometimes haunt her that she should lose consciousness of what she was saying, and reveal her identity; and again she would feel she did not care—the weight of that hidden identity was more than she could carry.

Mrs. Dunstan was very anxious, and talked of a doctor; but in South African households he is not sent for till life hangs on a very fine thread, and as it was not considered that Hester had quite reached the required condition he was not summoned.

On Christmas Day the rest of the party went down to the beach and had luncheon, while Hester sat on the verandah, or lay on her bed, thinking of the Christmases she had spent at home, till she could almost hear the singing of the waits and catch the sound of bells in the rush of the waves.

At Caervean the quiet house had seemed to put on energy for the time, and to have some connection with its neighbours. She wondered how Christmas was spent there now! Two of the children, at least, were lacking—Edwin was on the sea, and herself lost! Did Mary's children come to take their places in the old home, or were her father and aunt and Joan and Philip alone there? And she thought, too, of the everlasting Christmas story, and felt almost a kind of pity for herself that she should not exactly

believe the beautiful legend that thrilled so many hearts.

The next day was stormy, and then there were two rainy days, compared to which Hester thought that the misery of the two first days of a sea voyage was light.

South African houses seem built for sounds to penetrate even to their remotest corners. Many have canvas ceilings without any boarding above, which allows every word spoken and every movement made in one room to be as audible in its neighbours as in itself.

Weary and jaded with doing nothing, every one went to bed about eight o'clock, an arrangement which, though the children were dreadfully tired, they would resist with the most terrific yells and roars that would only stop when sheer exhaustion drove them to sleep.

Then would be heard again the continuous clatter of the rain upon the iron roof of the house and verandah, broken, perhaps, by the discovery of "a horrible thing"—a name the children had given to a creature with more than a centipede's share of legs —crawling on the wall of the room; and Mr. Cairns would ask, with a desperate attempt at being cheerful, if he should fetch his gun, and would give the beast a slap with a shoe with such a report that one would think the gun had really been used.

Then all would grow dark and every sound die out but the rain, which rattled on the iron as if a never-ending hailstorm was falling; and Hester would lie in her corner aching in every joint, till she felt as if the bed was treacherously letting her sink through it, and the jaw-breaking yawns of that terrible sleepiness which cannot ease itself in slumber took hold of her.

Sometimes the longing would seize her to die in England, and she would try to calculate how long it would take her to drag herself to a seaport where she could embark; but the knowledge that before she had got half a mile she would be followed and brought back as a lunatic, prevented her from making the attempt. The days and nights seemed never-ending. She could not talk, she could not read; her head ached so much that she could not bear to have any one else read to her. Never before had she been so helpless—never had will been obliged to wait on power.

Sometimes her head would be light, and she would fancy herself a little child again, learning her lessons at Joan's side; and when she came to herself she would long to be as she was then, with something to hope for, something to believe in, something to pray to. And prayers she sent up—though they were unexpressed—that out of chaos she might find light.

Then a horrible loathing of that one black deed

that she had done came upon her, and for the first time it started before her without any veil—a murder. She shrank from it and tried to put it away, but it stared her in the face, and she trembled at it. She wondered that any good could ever have come of it—that she had ever expected that any would come.

All that she had endured herself in consequence seemed unable to smear it, much less to blot it out. Lady Macbeth's remorse flitted across her mind. Even in her sleep it would cling to her and trouble her—not as it was in reality, but it would assume fantastic physical terrors. It seemed to her that she had walked into a building full of dense smoke, which gathered and closed around her, thickening every moment, while she panted for fresh air and struggled violently to beat back the volumes with her arms; or she had leaped off a tower, thinking she could fly, and now she was falling, falling for minutes, hours, days, dizzy and breathless, yet shrinking with terror from the last shock which she was expecting every moment.

At length this ceased, and a period came in which thoughts and imaginations seemed alike impossible, and she lay sleeping heavy dreamless sleep, or dozing in half-consciousness of what went on around her. From this she recovered so far as to remove every day to the verandah, where she

would sit lazily enjoying the breadth and warmth of the sea and sky, and the scrub-covered sandhills that spread around. The world seemed very bright to look at, and though she had a strange feeling that she was outside it, she could see the pleasantness and the glory around her. Everything was bright: the flowers were of a thousand different hues, the sky and sea glowed, and even the placid waters of the lake which wound among the hills reflected the brilliancy of the clouds.

After her first tottering walk to the beach, Hester regained strength rapidly. To her the sea was still the sea, though it might be the Indian Ocean instead of the Atlantic; and it gave her a sense of home, though the bush-clad hills around, dotted with aloes and trellised with creepers, seemed perpetually to be reminding her that she was not in England.

One thing she learned to admire about Agnes during her illness was that, with all her display of temper, she showed a most wonderful patience with the children, ministering to their wants or whims, soothing their sorrows and bearing with their unreasonableness in a way that perfectly surprised Hester; and afterwards, when she was able to take her place in the little excursions, the natural vigour that each of the two possessed threw them into a kind of companionship.

They climbed the few rocks there were, together;

they skirted points to collect shells from the more distant beaches; they sketched the lake and the hills.

"You can't row, Lucy, I suppose?" said Agnes one day, looking wistfully at the boat fastened to the stump of a tree, which she was putting into her little picture.

"No, I wish I could. Nor you, can you?"

"No. Papa took us up the river two or three times while you were ill, but he said it was such heavy work he did not care for it."

"It is a pity," said Hester. "I should like to go up away out of sight among those hills. I believe I could row if I tried."

Although she had lived so near the sea she had rarely been into a boat when she was a child, for her father had always been afraid of an accident happening to her, and had forbidden her to go.

"I am *sure* I could," said Agnes. "I should like to try. I wish we elder ones weren't all girls. Now if we had been boys instead of such miseries of girls we might have done something. It would be something fresh to do in this old out-of-the-world place. I wonder if we are ever going home again. Here have we been stuck down for six weeks, and never a single soul been near us that one would care to see, except Frank for a few days."

"I thought I heard something about going home

next week," said Hester. "And Mr. Turner is coming again one day soon, isn't he?"

"Yes, I believe; but that is nothing to me. He and Clare only just go off together, and sit about on the grass and get bitten by all sorts of things, and that makes them as cross as if it was my doing. But there is one thing to be said: now you are about, I sha'n't feel so out of it when he comes."

Hester was very divided in her wishes about bringing the sea visit to a close. She had watched the newspapers, and had seen a notice of her brother's departure, and later a telegram that the ship had arrived safely, but that was all she had gleaned of his movements. Mr. Thurstan's were never mentioned, though Agnes would occasionally bring his name forward with a remark that savoured of defiance, but without carrying the subject on.

There had arisen two feelings to prevent Hester's rejoicing in a prospect of returning. In the first place the journey had grown into a haunting nightmare, and she dreaded going over it again. Then, in the second, she seemed to be resting and gathering strength for a mental wrestle which she knew was coming, which she meant to come, but which she forced aside for the time. She had not forgotten her thoughts and feelings during her illness, and she had not done with them yet, but she told herself that sick people often saw things awry—their very weakness

making them paint things in much stronger colours than they really wore; so that it would be wise of her to get as well in body as she could before again plunging herself into confusion of mind.

But when she got home something had to be faced out; of this she was determined. Yet, at the same time, she shrank from her resolution as she did from its consequences—though what the consequences would be she could not for a moment define. But that she would be compelled to take some decided step she felt.

So she was not able to echo Agnes's wish for a speedy return home.

"I have a great mind to ask Papa to let us try to row," said Agnes, as they went back to the cottage. "Will you go, if I do?"

"Oh yes," assented Hester; "but I don't think for a moment that he will let us."

"I don't see why he shouldn't. We are not salt or sugar, that we shall melt if we get a little wet. If we were Clare, now—that piece of whit-brod—we might expect to soak into a pulp."

Seeing her father smoking his pipe as he tramped the length of the verandah, she at once made her request.

"You and Lucy try to row the boat? You may as well try to move the house," said Mr. Cairns. "You will never get the old thing off. I don't

suppose either of you could carry an oar down to her."

"But may we try?"

"I don't care; there is no harm in your trying. You won't be able to do it."

The girls left him on getting this permission, and as it was too late to avail themselves of it that evening they were perfectly silent about it in Mr. Cairns's presence, and talked as if their flower-painting and bathing were all that was in their minds, though privately they discussed nothing but their surprise at being allowed to go, and issued invitations to the rest of the party to go up the river with them.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### PLEASURE OR PAIN?

NO one accepted the offer of a row but Rob and Malcolm.

"I am going to the beach with the two children," said Clare.

"You can do that any blue Monday," said Agnes, with scorn.

"So I can scramble into the boat and out again any day."

"I can't say I think it a very sensible proceeding," said Mrs. Dunstan. "You will only get yourselves hot, I'm afraid; and then, if you are upset into the water, you will be sure to take colds, even if none of you get drowned."

"We will do our best not to upset," said Hester.

The oars were kept in a storeroom at the cottage,

so the girls went in, and taking up the first two they saw, marched off to the landing-place. Hester found her oar very heavy to carry. She tried it across her shoulder, but that would not do, and she had changed hands with it two or three times before she got to the boat. Then Agnes exclaimed that she did not believe they were a match, and, upon measuring, it was found that Hester's was much heavier and longer than hers.

"It is a great pity," said Hester. "I am afraid we shall not be able to make such nice even strokes as we could with a pair. But it would hardly do to go back now to change it, would it?"

"Oh no! I am afraid we might meet Papa, and he would say we had had enough for to-day. It is very provoking; but you must be very careful to steer well, Rob."

"What have I to do?" asked Rob.

"Pull," answered Agnes, very indefinitely, as she got into the boat. "You had better take off your shoes and stockings, so that if she drifts off a little when you unfasten her, you may scramble in without getting them wet. It is just a lovely day for us—not so dreadfully hot as it was yesterday."

"Do let us get off as fast as we can," said Hester, feeling like a schoolgirl away for the day. "I saw Mrs. Cairns come to the end of the verandah and look at us a minute ago."

"Come, Malcolm; you are to sit there. Make haste, Rob. What are you fiddling at?"

"I am being as quick as I can," said Rob, without the least indication of hurry.

"I'll push off," said Agnes, when Rob had got in; and with great exertion she got the boat to glide into deeper water.

She took her place. "Now, Rob, steer."

"Where are we going?" asked Rob.

"Where we can."

"But suppose we should get right over to the other side, and not be able to get back?"

"Suppose the hills fall in and block up the river!" said Agnes.

"Well, I don't mind where we go," said Rob, doggedly; "it's all the same to me. I can swim back."

This was a taunt, for the girls could not swim.

"We can walk round the mouth, at any rate, I suppose," said Agnes. "Are you ready, Lucy?"

"Yes."

They strained and pulled to no purpose.

"You boys sit still. We don't want to have the boat upset," exclaimed Agnes.

This was merely a nervous ejaculation, for both boys were as still as statues.

"I tell you what I believe it is," said Hester. "We are sitting the wrong way. We ought to have our backs towards where we want to go."

"Yes, of course."

So they changed.

"Now let us try. We *must* get off."

With desperate efforts they got a few yards.

"Pull, Rob," cried Agnes, and the boat swung round in a circle, while she nearly went on her back. "But you mustn't always pull the same way."

"Well, which way must I pull?"

"Why, the other way."

"Perhaps if Rob did not steer at all till we have got to use the oars a little together, we might get on better," suggested Hester.

They went about twenty yards up the river, when Hester cried: "Help me, Rob! My oar is going to cut me in two against the side of the boat. What could have made the thing catch me like that?" she asked Agnes, when she had got some control over it again.

"I am sure I cannot tell. It is so heavy, I suppose."

"The river," like so many other rivers in that parched region, did not reach the sea more than about once in five years, and when it did it ran itself nearly dry. Now, however, it was stopped from going so far by sandbanks, and formed a beautiful lake three or four miles long.

"This is splendid!" said Hester, as they made a rather wavy course up the river.

"It just is," agreed Agnes, and they tugged and tugged.

They had got up a couple of hundred yards, when, the boat having made a curve and got her head the other way, they went down again nearly as far as the landing-place. After a little experience, however, they soon found that if one pulled and the other did not they could turn the boat, to some degree, if not exactly, in the direction they wanted. So they proudly went up once more, giving instructions and hints to each other, laughing at their first troubles, and proposing a heavier boat-load for themselves the next time they chose to take a little exercise this way.

"Really it is charming up here!" said Hester, as they went round a bend and a kingfisher darted past. "Those reeds are lovely."

"What other bird is that?" exclaimed Malcolm, pointing to the opposite bank.

"That is a kind of heron," said Agnes. "Don't you like him, with his blue body and long legs?"

"Yes. I'd like to see it close."

"I wish I had my catapult here; I'd have a shot at the old fellow then," said Rob.

"I am very glad you haven't. What should you want to shoot the bird for? I get so sick of you boys: shoot, shoot, everything you can see. I wonder you haven't tried your hand on the fish yet.

Lucy, we might row over for Malcolm to get a nearer view."

Quite proud of being able to do it, the girls made across the river.

"It is very pretty, and it seems quite tame," said Agnes. "I suppose people don't often come up here to scare it."

"Hullo! this looks like going up-hill," said Rob, as the keel of the boat grazed on gravel and then stuck fast.

Hester and Agnes felt rather foolish, but put a good face upon the matter.

"We have come a little too far in, I suppose," said Hester.

"Yes; but we can easily push off into deeper water again," said Agnes.

She stuck her oar into the mud and pushed with all her might, but could not move the boat. However, at length, with Hester's help, it was got off, but alas! only to swing on to another shallow.

They pushed her off that, and Agnes cried, "Pull the rudder to the left," upon which the boat swung right round and stuck again.

"Do let us rest a minute," said Hester. "I am so hot that I hardly know what I am trying to do."

"I wish that bird wouldn't stand there," said Agnes. "It puts me out of temper to see it there looking at us so gravely, and as cool as a water-melon."

Then she made a series of soundings with her oar all round the boat, and they pushed it off again to the part she thought deepest. But it was of no use. They only stuck fast, and had to push off again and again. They now tried to get out of the shoals at the place they had got in, but they could not manage it. Although they tried every turn of Rob's steering, and put all the rowlocks on one side and both rowed that way, they no sooner got off one bank and thought all was well than they were on to another.

"I wonder what we are to do," said Agnes, at last. "What fools we were to come. I don't know how we are ever to get back. And it looks as if it were going to rain too! Malcolm, don't begin to howl now. If you don't keep quiet I will never bring you out with me again."

"I don't want you to," whined Malcolm.

"If we keep steadily pushing ourselves one way, we shall get through all the shallows in time," said Hester; "though we may be a long time over it."

"It would not be so bad if we could only get on shore," said Agnes. "I would not mind leaving the boat a rap. We could send somebody for it afterwards. But here one is like a beast that has tumbled into a snare: it isn't in the least hurt, but it can't get away. Why there are some black fellows staring at us! Impertinence! What is it to them if we choose to stick in the mud."

"They are not laughing," said Hester, "which I think they might easily do; though I hate as much as you do to see anybody looking on when I can't do what I want to. I declare they are coming through the water!" And to her dismay they made straight for the boat. She strained her oar in vain—it would not stir; and the men, on getting to it, instantly scrambled in without a word of invitation or explanation.

The elder took her oar out of her hands, while she shrank away to the farthest corner frightened, but unresisting. Agnes was not so passive. She refused to yield up her oar till she had had some parley.

"Can you row?" she asked.

"Yes, very good."

"You've a good opinion of yourself, at any rate. Can this other one row?"

"Yes, as good as me."

"They are going to get us out of this, I suppose," she said to Hester. "I am sure they are welcome to the job for me."

So it proved. In a few minutes they had got the boat into water where they could work the oars well, and the girls found themselves going down the river much faster than they had come up. But, glad as they were to be released from their unpleasant position, their pleasure was a good deal damped by the prospect of returning home in such a fashion; a feel-

ing which was increased when, on coming round the bend, they perceived a group of people on a projecting point a little farther down, towards which the men directly steered.

"They have raised the country to drag the river for our remains, I suppose," said Agnes, bitterly. "Can you land there?" she asked one of the men.

He made a sign of assent.

"Who can they all be?" asked Hester. "There must be some strangers."

"What will you bet me, Agnes," said hawk-eyed Malcolm, "that that man standing by Papa is that Mr. Thurstan who came to see us once?"

"I won't bet anything. It may be old Cetewayo himself, or any other beast, for anything I care."

But Malcolm was irrepressible, and his interest grew as they got nearer. "Why, there is Frank too."

"What does it matter? What's the good of making a fuss?"

They were now drawing near the point at which they were to touch.

"I'll lay *two* new hats that you have never been so glad in your lives to feel your feet on *terra firma* as you will be now," called out Mr. Cairns, as the crestfallen party drew close, and he approached to help them out. "You don't try that little game again, I'll be bound. However, I never thought you'd get so far."

"You would lose your hats," said Hester, after greeting the new-comers, but making no motion to leave her place. "You are mistaken! I have no intention of landing here. I could not think of going back in any such ignominious fashion. We only came here to get rid of our assistants, and to politely offer to row you all home if you like to get in."

"Well, there is one thing I am safe in backing you for, anyhow," said Mr. Cairns. "That's in not knowing when you are beaten. You will both be in bed to-morrow. Loote, we may as well go down in the boat. Here, you fellows, come up to the house presently, and I'll give you something."

The blacks got out, and the other party, consisting of Mr. and Mrs. Cairns, Clare, and the two young men, got in.

"Where is Mrs. Dunstan?" asked Hester.

"She said she did not wish to see you drowned with her own eyes, when she heard the boat had really gone up the river, so she would not come out with us when we went on the hill to find out what had become of you all," said Clare.

"I hope you enjoyed the sight," said Agnes, with scorn. "I must say it was a fine thing for two young men to stand staring at a couple of girls in a hole, until some Kafirs who chanced to be passing came and got them out. Ach! it is enough to disgust one with the whole tribe! I have two old

dresses at home that I want to get rid of; I will give them to you. Since you behave like women, you may as well dress like them, too."

"That's enough, Agnes," said her father, in a tone in which anger and amusement were curiously blended. "Your dresses are too small for me, and I was the only man that I know of who saw you stuck up there. Thurstan and Frank only turned up just now. I didn't choose to get myself drenched because two girls had been silly enough to go rowing about in water they knew nothing of, and I preferred to pay a couple of brutes to go up and do it instead. If you had been in real danger it would have been another thing. Rob, none of your playing with that rudder. Take the thing out altogether; you don't know how to steer, and it isn't wanted in the least here now."

Bevil Thurstan seated himself by Hester, and took an oar, while Mr. Cairns was speaking.

"Dogs that bark so loudly don't bite, people say, don't they?" said Hester, seeing him look at Agnes with astonishment.

"You have the satisfaction, anyhow, of giving a dog a lusty kick if he tries to bite you, but you can't get that let-off for your feelings for only a bark."

Hester assented, and laughed lightly as the boat went off under swift, even strokes. Five minutes

before she had been feeling worn-out, and as if she did not care in the least what happened; now she did not mind her aching arms and back, and she thought the fruitless half-hour's struggle she and Agnes had had a joke that she could talk and laugh over.

"It strikes me we shall all be pretty glad of our luncheon," said Mr. Cairns, when the boat was made fast. "I propose that we make straight for the house. We have one and all had about enough exercise for one spell."

"You have made a long stay here," said Bevil to Hester, as they went slowly up the footpath.

"It has not seemed so long since the first fortnight," said Hester.

"I heard you had been very ill. I scarcely hoped to find you so much recovered."

"That means, I suppose, that you expected to find a lymphatic, poor creature, crawling around, never venturing beyond the pace we are going now. I don't think I should live like that long. I was sufficiently wretched at the time, I own."

"You don't know how wofully tired you are looking at this minute. I wish I could spirit you up the hill."

"I am too weighty for spirits to meddle with, I think," said Hester. "And what have you been doing all these weeks? I suppose you have shot

nearly everything on Groenbosch? Do you know, a tiger pays us a visit here sometimes by night. Our horses were dreadfully scared once. You and Mr. Turner may be lucky enough to meet with it."

"I have only been at Groenbosch this last week," said Bevil. "I went down to East London to see Carnsew off, and thought I might as well go on to Natal for a few weeks. I had promised to go up to see a man there I know."

"And which colony do you like best, the old or the new?"

"The old is the most interesting for a visit, I think; but I would rather live in the new."

"In spite of the heat?"

"Yes. The country is so much more thickly populated. It is all very well to be monarch of all you survey, but I would rather it should include a few decent houses within a get-at-able distance."

Mr. and Mrs. Cairns had gone directly to the sitting-room, where Mrs. Dunstan was anxiously waiting. "Here's a pretty go!" he exclaimed. "It seems you and I might as well have stayed at home and twiddled our thumbs. Who would ever have thought of the fellow's turning up here like this. If Frank brings a man to the house, I can't order him off just because I don't know who he is."

"I always told you, Andrew," said his wife, "that if a man falls in love with a girl he will do his best

to make her fall in love with him, without caring in the least what her friends may wish."

"Ah, well; I suppose you women naturally know more about these matters than men."

"Nonsense! I am sure it is as much men's business as women's. But I am afraid Aunt Mary must make up her mind to lose Lucy."

"England is such a long way off for her to go," sighed Mrs. Dunstan.

"It's just possible she may send him to the right-about herself," said Mr. Cairns. "You never know. It strikes me she's not the kind of girl to dance after any man just because he holds up his finger to her."

"No, indeed. She has refused one or two good offers since she has been with me. But I don't think she will refuse Mr. Thurstan—and I do want her to marry. They got on all right, then, with the boat?"

"Ja. They are like two thoroughbred young colts: they would just go till they dropped. Goodness knows where they would have been if they hadn't got into shallow water up there, and not been able to clear themselves. I sent a couple of those black brutes up on the hill to go and get them off. We need not have disturbed ourselves about them, Aunt Mary," he went on, as the adventurers entered the room. "The niggers say the tears shed from

the boat had already raised the river an inch, and she would soon have been floated off."

Agnes left the room, remarking that she did not see the joke; while Malcolm, whose guilty conscience led him to fit a cap to himself that was meant for some one else, hung his head and gave a nervous chuckle, saying "he did not think it was all that"—to the amusement of everybody.

"Aunt Mary, we might have sung 'Ding, dong, bell, Cat's fallen in the well,' if we had thought of it in time," said Rob.

"And if we had had nothing else to do," said Hester.

"Well, what we did wasn't any use."

"Yes it was. We tried to do something, at least."

"We start for home on Monday morning," announced Mr. Cairns, willing to turn the conversation.

The girls proposed to go for a ride in the afternoon, but their father would not hear of it, and the only exertion he would allow for the rest of the day was a quiet stroll to the beach.

"How did you get on with sleeping in the waggon?" Agnes asked, at breakfast the next morning, of Bevil.

"With what ladies manage to put up, surely men could find nothing to grumble at," said Bevil.

"I should think not," said Mr. Cairns. "A nice, snug tent-waggon like that, that I gave £127 for."

On finding that Agnes and Hester had apparently suffered very little from their exertions, Mr. Cairns agreed that the whole family should proceed to a point about four miles off, where they could amuse themselves in picking up tiny shells and coral, and have lunch.

They were a large party. Mr. Cairns drove Mrs. Dunstan and the younger children in the cart. The others shared five or six horses amongst them, taking it in turns to ride and walk. The servants went too; the women each with a load on her head—one with the kettle, another with the watercan.

"Don't you think these Kafirs splendid women?" said Hester to Bevil, as their horses walked side by side down the beach.

"There is rather a waste of material in them, it seems to me," said Bevil.

"I can rather sympathize with them there," said Hester. "When I was a girl I used to wish myself a pigmy sometimes."

"I don't mean in their height. And you don't imagine yourself too fat, do you? One of those women would weigh three of you."

"It is always the greatest wonder to me that they submit to be beaten by their husbands, or by their white mistresses—as report says occasionally happens," says Hester.

"Yes, it is strange," said Bevil, smiling. "I

suppose the law of nature, that makes a man the head, is so instinctively strong in them that passive submission to their husbands is the consequence. Why they should let their mistresses beat them I cannot imagine. They are not the descendants of slaves, so it can be no effect of hereditary bondage."

"Mr. Cairns says it is the effect of the law of nature that make a white man the head of the black, which awes them into unresistance."

"I wonder what becomes of that law of nature, then, during the Kafir wars, and the massacres that generally start them?"

Their attention was suddenly drawn off their conversation by a little incident ahead.

The cook, who still retained some little fear of the sea, had carefully approached the water's edge till a spent wave just rippled over her bare feet. One of the men, seeing her wrapt in looking at the water, stole up behind her, and waiting till a larger wave came in, and she was just going to retreat, gave her a slight push, which so completely upset her presence of mind and her balance that she turned over the kettle that was on her head to that of the man, thereby causing a shout of laughter to rise at his expense as well as her own.

Mrs. Cairns laughed as heartily as anybody, but there was emphasis in her tone when she said, "Paas op (Look out), if you break my kettle."

Luckily the kettle escaped as uninjured as the heads, so no one was deprived of their coffee at lunch.

"Miss Dunstan, there is a lovely white anemone in a pool beyond those rocks; you must come and look at it," said Bevil, as Hester sat with Mrs. Dunstan near the place where they had had their meal.

Hester went without demurring. Caervean was in her thoughts. She had heard nothing more of her sisters, though once or twice Bevil had mentioned Edwin, and once or twice she had spoken of him.

She had not yet got over the feeling that this man who had appeared at one crisis of her life was to play a part in another. The intense blue of the water in the distance, the deeper shades, where sunken rocks lay, and the gentle roll of the waves upon the broad sandy beach, were the same as on that bright morning when they had first spoken to each other, which seemed so many years ago.

They walked for a few minutes without speaking, till they came to the little rocky pool.

"There it is. Do you see it? Isn't it a beauty?"

"Yes, it is a lovely one," said Hester. Then, yielding to a sudden impulse, she knelt down and touched it, to make it close its feelers round her fingers.

"Please forgive me for closing it up," she pleaded,

half ashamed. "I used to do it when I was a child."

A confused rush of memories came, and a longing for home that would not be controlled burst upon her; and one tear after another fell into the pool, while she bent her face almost close to the water to hide them.

"Was your childhood, then, so happy, or so sad?" Bevil asked, as he took her hand to help her when she rose.

"Happy," she said, quietly; and they again walked on in silence.

Presently they sat down.

"I have never told you of my luck," said Bevil. "You know you told me I was not likely to meet with a tiger? Well, on our way to King William's Town, Carnsew and I stayed a night at a farmhouse, and the man gave us a hunt the next day. He told us there was a tiger about somewhere, and I was lucky enough to shoot it."

"I am very glad," said Hester, with interest. "How I do wish I could hear Captain Carnsew relate how cleverly you managed!"

"Thank you. There was not much skill required, though. I have kept some of the claws for you; would you like to have them?"

"Very much."

"I hope you would not rather have had the

teeth? I thought the shape of the claws so much the prettier."

"So do I," said Hester, yet feeling at the same time a great desire to know what had become of the teeth.

He took a case from his pocket and, opening it, handed her a bracelet. The claws were set in a design of golden prickly-pear leaves.

"It is very beautiful," said Hester; then added proudly, "I cannot accept this."

"I have your picture. Will you have nothing of mine in return?"

"I did not have my picture put into a costly frame."

"That would not have altered its value to me in the least. Do take it; it is the first thing of the kind I ever shot."

And Hester replied quite gravely with another question: "What became of the teeth?" then gasped a laugh—"What did I say? I believe I am making a stupid of myself."

"Do, if that means that you will wear my tiger's claws. I gave the teeth to Carnsew, and he has sent them home to his sisters. This fastening is rather peculiar. Let me put it on for you."

Hester's mind was utterly confused. One instant she thought she would take the bracelet because her sisters had the teeth; the next came the inclination to refuse, and then she hesitated once more.

"I don't know what it is I want to convince myself of," she thought; "I only know I want to have what he wants to give me."

She held out her arm. "I give way. I have not a very graceful manner of accepting a present, have I? But I really think it was very kind of you to think of giving it to me, and I shall value it very much."

He fastened it on her arm, and she looked at it again.

"It is very lovely. I should never have thought such work could have been turned out in the colony."

"The design has been well carried out, hasn't it? I scarcely expected the man would be able to do it so well myself. Carnsew was very much pleased, too."

"Did Captain Carnsew have bracelets made?" asked Hester.

"No; he had a necklace made for Miss Carnsew, and a pendant for Mrs. Digby. He made his design of palm leaves."

"Mrs. Digby is the mother of that little girl you photographed?" asked Hester.

"Yes. She is a very pretty, attractive woman; but I like her sister better. *She* is one of those rare women who strike you as being decidedly good and decidedly pleasant at the same time."

"Yes, they are rare. Does Mrs. Digby live in Cornwall too?"

"No, in London. It is just as good as a home for Phil—that is the eldest brother, and a brother barrister of mine."

Hester began to speak, but checked herself.

"You were going to say, 'But not so idle as you are, I hope.' I think you are very hard on me for my holiday."

"How could I, who lead such a profitless life, think hardly of any one else? Don't you think it is you who are rather hard on me in attributing thoughts to me that I don't hold at all?"

Hester was very uneasy in her mind about what she had done—so uneasy, that it drove away all reflections on the scraps she had gleaned about her sisters. She saw clearly enough that she ought to have taken nothing from Mr. Thurstan. What right had she, who had cut herself off from the joys other women might have, to behave as if she were the same as they?

One moment she could have shouted with pleasure that he should have thought of her before any one else; the next she would have wept to think that, in taking such a present from him, she had, as it were, suffered herself to give a pledge she could not redeem, should the fulfilment be demanded.

She would have returned it, but she feared that

by opening the subject again she should betray how much importance she attached to it.

"I did not think I was so selfish," she thought. "I have considered only my own gratification, and have never cared whether I might be a trouble to him or not. But I will be careful enough for the future."



## CHAPTER XIX.

### A START FOR EDEN.

"Hence! home you idle creatures, get you home."
JULIUS CÆSAR.

THE next day was Saturday, and the men of the party left early in the morning for a bush-buck hunt, which occupied them all day, while the ladies devoted themselves chiefly to packing, and the preparation of provisions for the way.

In the evening Hester tried to summon resolution enough to treat her bracelet like any other gift, and to wear it in the sight of everybody, but after putting it on she took it off again. She knew she could not bear Agnes's eager exclamation on getting a first glimpse of it—"Lucy, I have never seen that bracelet of yours before"—with the calmness desirable.

They spent the morning of the last day on the river, Frank and Bevil rowing, and this time they passed the scene of Agnes's and Hester's adventures without getting into any trouble.

In the afternoon, when the others were going to the beach, Mrs. Dunstan said she was tired and would stay at the house, and Hester took advantage of the excuse to stay with her.

"Papa will have a lively time of it on the journey home," said Agnes to her mother, "playing gooseberry to two sets. He will be choked with his own sourness."

"Why don't you ride too, then, and give him the chance of a little company on his own account?" asked Mrs. Cairns.

"No, it is too hot and too tiring. Besides—no, thank you, I should not enjoy it myself."

Hester would not have objected to changing the elements composing the riding party, but she soon found that there was likely to be little chance of conversation during the first day's journey.

A rather high wind was blowing off the shore in the morning, which, catching the crests of the waves as they fell, blew back clouds of the finest spray. The sea was looking so fine that several ran down to take a farewell glance at it from the beach, and by so doing rather delayed the starting. Then Mr. Cairns proposed that those who were going on horseback should

call on some acquaintances living near, and have lunch with them. Accordingly this was done, and it was past one o'clock before they started to follow the waggon.

The wind was still rising, and the two girls cantered their horses for miles, side by side, scarcely exchanging a word. When they reached the waggon they were much afraid they would receive orders to take refuge in it; but while Mr. Cairns was vainly attempting to exchange civilities with his wife, and hear how she was getting on with the children, a gust caught his hat, and whirled it away with such speed that it required a gallop of a couple of hundred yards to catch it again, while the scarf was rent off and streamed on the wind.

This so took off Mr. Cairns's attention, that the girls were allowed to pass on, to their satisfaction.

Presently, however, as they cantered along a more sheltered place, Clare's saddle suddenly slipped round, and she was seated in the middle of the road. Her horse stopped at once, and her father, who was off his almost as soon as she was on the ground, improved the occasion by some rather strong language when he found she was not hurt.

"I never thought those people were such fools that they could not girth a horse decently, though I never did think them very sharp. You are sure you are not hurt?"

"Yes Papa, quite sure. I am scarcely at all shaken."

"It might have been a good deal worse, if Endymion hadn't been perfectly quiet, or if your foot had stuck in the stirrup. I thought at the time, 'Now I wonder if those girls' saddles are all right,' but I thought it would hardly look civil to go and see, after those Grey fellows had put them on themselves."

Of course Frank Turner and Bevil had dismounted too, and now Bevil came to Hester's side.

"Is your saddle firm?"

"Oh yes, I think, thank you. It feels quite right."

"I cannot trust to the chance of its being so, after this," he said.

For a moment their eyes met. It was but the glance of an instant, but in that instant each knew that they loved and were loved.

Hester's hand was on her horse's neck; Bevil laid his upon it for a moment, and then went to his work of inspection.

Mr. Cairns came up. "How is your saddle, Lucy?"

"It is all right, thank you; Mr. Thurstan has just shortened the girths a hole."

"Ah! he is a Britisher, and perhaps knows less about saddling a horse than setting the Thames on fire," said Mr. Cairns, coolly feeling for himself. "One of those raw Britishers broke his stirrup-leather the other day by our house, and asked for another *saddle*

to go home on, as he had broken a piece off his; and when I gave him a leather, he knew no more how to set about putting the thing right than if he had been born a fish. I don't want another spill. Ja, this seems right enough."

"He must have been a *very* raw Britisher," said Bevil, good-temperedly. "I have saddled a good many horses, one time and another."

"I dare say," allowed Mr. Cairns. "These girths are all right, any way. I never thought to see Clare come off like that."

"Endymion behaved well," said Hester, wishing to say something of the affair on which Mr. Cairns could reflect with pleasure.

"He just did. But they weren't to know that he would. If those confounded fools wish to break their own necks there would be no great harm done, and nobody would mind much; but I did think they had sense enough to be decently careful what they were about when they were doing with ladies. You girls had better put on your jackets. This wind is enough to cut anybody in two; and I don't know what it is coming to, but it looks very like rain now. It's what I call a sneezing unpleasant day."

The jackets were strapped in a roll to Frank Turner's saddle. He took Clare hers, and Bevil fetched Hester's for her, and in a few minutes they cantered on again.

They soon had to cross a level piece of upland, where they would have been a very comical sight to witness had there been any unconcerned spectator to watch them. The wind was blowing furiously. Mr. Cairns's hat was pulled down on his ears, and his coat, having filled like a sail, made him look the size of an elderly Dutchman. Every one lurched to windward in the hope of preventing the gusts from breaking broadside upon them, while the horses' tails made a sharp angle the other way. Both the young men had to gallop after their hats, and the girls clung to their saddles, almost fearing to be carried out of them. The horses went as fast as they could battle their way, but every now and then Hester's seemed to be blown against Clare's.

A hill at a couple of hundred yards' distance from the road became invisible, from the cloud of sand that whirled from it and stung the faces of the travellers like hail.

Suddenly the rain came down as if it had had no chance of showing what it could do since the Deluge, and wished to make up for lost opportunities. Luckily there was a house in sight, and Mr. Cairns at once led the way to it, but in the few minutes it took to get there the girls' habit-skirts were wet through.

They dismounted without ceremony and rushed to the door, where they were met by the mistress

of the house, who, with hospitable welcome, bade them "Come into the parlour," and after waiting a minute in this sanctum, escorted them into a bed-room, where they took off their habit-skirts, amid a series of exclamations on the old lady's part, and explanations on theirs.

"I will take them out by the kitchen fire," said the hostess; then going to the door she called, "Emma Jane, come and put these skirts by the fire—not too close, or they will get burnt."

She was a buxom, middle-aged woman, plump and energetic, by no means disposed to allow her numerous daughters to be idle, but not at all willing to resign all the superintendence of domestic matters to them. The order to Emma Jane was followed by one given, in the same elevated voice, to Elizabeth to "bring in the tea-things to the parlour."

She then returned to her guests, and producing the trains of two dresses, suggested their immediately donning them.

The girls, however, said they would sit in the bed-room till their habits were dry; and she bustled off, evidently to assist in the preparations for a meal.

Clare found herself a book, and Hester sat thinking. She was aware that Bevil's manner had already changed towards her. When they had got to the house he had taken her off her horse, and said, "Run

in quickly. I will bring whatever may be in your saddle-pocket," in the tone of one who had a special right to look after her. She had thrilled with pleasure at it at the moment, but now it brought a sense of humiliation with it. She was called on to redeem her pledge, and the coin she had to offer would not ring. Then came a great temptation: why should she not pass it? No one knew but herself. "Take the good the gods provide you," flashed through her mind. She had not sought this love in any way; she might surely take it when it was offered. All she would have to do would be to be silent. It was like opening paradise to her—to have a husband whom she loved, a home of her own, and then to go back as a happy wife to her own land, to meet again her own kindred. There surely could be no risk about it, for Edwin himself had not recognized her. Could she wish for anything better than the prospect she held in her grasp? Bevil Thurstan was the friend of her own people. Did it not seem like a special working of fate, to reinstate her amongst them after her years of abnegation? She would go back to Caervean as a beloved wife, and see again the longed-for faces and listen again to the longed-for voices. And she would ramble with Bevil through all her old haunts, rendered doubly dear from long separation.

The rain streamed down as if it were being poured

from a bucket, and the water beat in at the window-sill, while the wind shook the house; but she dreamed her bright day-dream, and only saw the green slopes and gay gardens of her home, and heard the murmur of mingled voices.

## CHAPTER XX.

### NO THOROUGHFARE.

"Chewing the cud of sweet and bitter fancies."

"VOUS bâtissez des chateaux en Espagne," said Clare to Hester, as Mrs. Tod opened the door again.

"Non, ce sont en Angleterre," replied Hester, dreamingly; then suddenly recollecting herself, she joined in Clare's laugh at her literal way of taking the sentence.

"The tea is all ready now," said the hostess, cheerfully, as if they must be glad to hear it; and in truth they were hungry enough. "Your habits ain't dry," went on Mrs. Tod, unhanging two dress-skirts from pegs behind the door and holding them out. "It is not always so handy nowadays, when

Princess robes are all the fashion. And we haven't got very many bodies separate, but I think these two will do very nicely."

Hester thought for a moment of begging to have her tea brought to her where she was, but the simple confidence with which Mrs. Tod tendered the garment was irresistible, though she took one hopeless look at Clare before she put it on.

"Don't be afraid," said Mrs. Tod, mistaking the hesitation they exhibited; "you can't harm them sitting out there in the parlour."

At this Clare and Hester could scarcely help laughing. Fortunately the glass was far too small and awkwardly placed to permit them to see more of themselves than the dark blue habit-bodies. Clare had a light grey skirt, which would have been unobtrusive had the body matched; but Hester was arrayed in a brownish orange alpaca, flounced almost to the waist, and a great deal too short for her in front.

Had Mrs. Tod left them they would never have got into the parlour, but as one room led into the other, and she boldly threw open the door for them to pass out, they had no choice.

Hester was reassured by hearing Mr. Cairns saying, in a perfectly grave voice—

"It's fortunate, Mrs. Tod, that some of your daughters' things fit those two girls."

"Yes. That, you know, might have been made for this one," pointing to the shrinking Clare—"Elizabeth is just her size; but there isn't one of them that is so big as *Miss* Cairns there," pointing to Hester. "Rebecca's dress is rather short for her. But it doesn't matter; she's got what I call a pretty foot and ankle, so she needn't mind showing them a bit. Law me! when I was a girl we shouldn't have thought anything of wearing our clothes as short as that; but times are changed now, I suppose, for my girls are always wanting to drag about half a yard of stuff on the ground after them."

"Well, Anne, I think we may let them have their way in a little thing like that; they are good girls, take them all round," said her husband, mildly.

"I never said they weren't; I know they are," answered Mrs. Tod, briskly. "Now, will you sit up to the table, please?"

The meal to which she invited her guests consisted of bread-and-butter, cake, gooseberry jam, and cheese.

"I wonder how those poor wretches are getting on in the waggon?" said Mr. Cairns, as he changed his seat. "That wind was enough to carry away the sail if everything was not well fastened down. I hope they have managed to get to some shelter, and out-spanned. I think I remember one place where they could, and they would be just about there when it got to its worst."

"Yes, there is a round bush just coming up that dip," said Mr. Tod.

"It must be a good-sized bush to give much shelter from this," said Bevil.

"A round bush here does not mean one single bush," explained Hester; "but a clump detached from anything else."

"It is a lucky thing," said Mr. Cairns, "that Mrs. Cairns is as well up to making the best of things at such a time as anybody I know. If there is shelter to be had, she will get into it for a certainty."

"I dare say she has had some practice in war times when you have had to be away and she has had to manage by herself?" said Mr. Tod.

"No. There was a laager two or three miles from us, and we could easily have treked into that if the worst had come. But we have never once had to trek since we have been married. We packed for it once, but didn't go after all."

"You don't mean to say so!" exclaimed Mrs. Tod. "Well I should think it a deal of trouble now, but I didn't mind it so much when I was a girl. Only once when we treked with old Mr. Nachtigal he would carry his coffin in the waggon too, and that wasn't to my liking, I mind."

"I should think not," said Clare.

"It was a sensible thing enough for an old man like that to do, though; but in the night-time it

used to give me the creeps to think of the thing hanging up there across the back of the waggon, and mother was such a big body I was always afraid she would upset it getting in and out of the waggon."

But from her mother Mrs. Tod speedily turned the conversation to her children, and her guests soon perceived that "families" was one of her favourite topics.

Her especial glory seemed to be the fact that one of her husband's sisters had fourteen children, all of whom were living, and the eldest of whom *was not* yet nineteen. She repeated these facts several times, and further went into the details of many miraculous escapes experienced by some of the fourteen, which led one to suppose she thought there was an unusually special providence exerted to keep up the number.

Hester then had plenty of time to examine the room—a tiny little place for so many to get into, with two small square windows, neither in the middle of its wall, and two doors, as well as a fireplace pushed into one corner; but there was a Brussels carpet and a very good Broadwood piano, at which Hester wondered much when she afterwards came to learn that not one of the family could play upon it—for as they could learn to read and write at home, their parents had never seen the necessity of sending any of them to school. On the

table was a vase filled with very fine dahlias, and in the window a row of little boxes grew maidenhair fern.

"Your ferns are lovely. Do they grow here?" asked Hester.

"Yes; there is plenty of it down in some of the kloofs. The girls don't care where they go, and they have a fancy for bringing it in to grow."

"The kloofs look very steep about here. I remember noticing them as we went down."

"Yes; I often tell the girls, when they go scrambling off in them, that they'll meet with a tiger down there some of these days."

"Oh, my dear, there's not much fear of that," said her husband; "there is hardly such a thing to be met with here nowadays. They are more plentiful up with you, Mr. Cairns, I expect?"

"No, we never see one now. Last year, when the boys were home for their holidays, with two or three other fellows, there was a talk that somebody had seen the spoor of one down under one of the kranzes. The boys had made up their minds to go down that way fishing, the next day, at a big hole of water there is there, and they had a good deal to say about the brute overnight. But off they started in the morning, brave enough, and just after they were gone Mr. Westmore (that's Mrs. Cairns's father) came, and we took it into our heads to have a joke

with them. So we saddled our horses and went off after them. Leaving the horses hidden a good way off, we crept up quietly through the bush, well out of sight, till we were about ten yards off, and looked in at the party. They had a little black pony called Dick with them, and he was hooked up by the bridle to a bush by the little footpath. The boys were lying about upon the little bare piece in front of the pool. One rascal was fishing, one or two were preparing for a swim, one was getting a few sticks together for a fire; but they were all talking in a chatty, lazy way. We waited till, at length, there was one of those queer kind of breaks that come in everything. The boys were silent, the birds quiet, the reeds didn't give a rustle, and not a fish jumped. One or two of the party seemed to remember something, and stole looks around at the high kranz and the steep rocks which ran round the pool, closing in the little spot where they were on three sides. Just then Mr. Westmore gave a long, low growl. In a moment every fellow stood on guard. Not a word was spoken, but each looked at the others and then at the bush; but it was too dense—they couldn't see anything. Then he gave a second growl, just a trifle louder than the first. Möcthe doch! there was no time for a look then. It was 'the devil take the hindermost' in the rush to the pony. A flash of lightning is longer than they took to unhook him,

and then came low entreaties of 'Lend a hand, Tom!' 'For God's sake, man, don't let go the stirrup!' 'Hold on, Frank, whatever you do!' My bleeding country! it was a sight to see how they urged that little devil of a pony right up the stony rock, where you'd hardly think anything but a goat could climb; with three on his back, one holding on by the stirrup, and a fifth clinging for life at the tail. Goodness knows how they got to the top, but they did somehow, and then pushed right on through the bushes and stones for home—fishing-rods, shoes, jackets, dinner, all left behind. Of course we galloped round, and got home before they burst in in hot haste. 'Get your guns, and come along with us; the tiger's there, sure enough! We heard him close by. I suppose he had come down to drink. Man alive, it was a terrible sound!' You never would have guessed the state of excitement those boys were in. And that is the last we heard of any of those animals being about."

The wind and rain had both lessened considerably for some time, and it was now announced that the waggon had come in sight of the house, and was out-spanning.

Mr. Cairns went to see how things had gone, and came back with the intelligence that all was right. It had waited under the shelter of the friendly bush during the worst of the storm. It was now decided

that no attempt should be made to go farther that day, and the two girls were to stay where they were, while the gentlemen rode on to an inn about four miles ahead.

Hester had kept her seat almost ever since she came into the room, in the endeavour to keep her brilliant flounces as unobtrusive as she could; but now the twilight was coming on, and she rose to say good-bye.

"I hope you will not get very wet," she said.

"I am glad you have not to go out into it again to-night," Bevil said, as he took her by the hands and drew her into the little passage. "Good-bye, dearest," and he kissed her.

She freed her hands, and said, in a tone of earnest entreaty—

"Please do not do that again."

"I won't ask pardon for an offence I am sure to commit again," he said lightly.

At this moment Frank Turner came to the door, and called in—

"Time and Mr. Cairns wait for no man."

"I can ride after," answered Bevil.

But Hester at the same moment said "Good night," and went into the sitting-room. She turned back to the noise and glare of the little room. The undercurrent of her excitement was very strong; but she was obliged to talk and seem interested in

matters which, at the moment, were not only indifferent to her, but an utter weariness. Clare played on the piano, to the delight of Mr. Tod, and the children crowded to the door and squeezed into the room to listen.

It was a relief at last when Mrs. Tod asked if the girls would not like a glass of milk before they went to bed—a proposition which they took as a signal for retiring.

"I feel almost as if it were selfish of us to be in here, when those poor things are all out in the waggon," said Clare, when they got into their room; "but, of course, in reality it would only make their position worse if we went out and crowded in too."

"Yes," said Hester, "and it is not raining so much now. Do you think Mr. Cairns and the others got very wet?"

"If they did they could soon get right again at the inn. Papa had his waterproof, I know."

They said nothing more, and each crept to her bed.

Hester knew now that she had deceived herself in the afternoon when she had dreamt that she could be Bevil Thurstan's wife. She knew that she loved him far too well ever to be false to him. She could not walk by his side through life with that secret on her soul. She would always feel it was there—a gulf,

across which they could never pass; and some day she would be driven, like the Ancient Mariner, to tell it to him—and then, would he not curse her? No, it could not be; they must go their separate ways. "I will not take another false step," she thought. "I fancied my life was a ruined one before, and I will not drag in another to share it. What have I done already? As far as I am concerned myself, I would gladly have the extra misery for the happiness I have had. If it were only myself who had to suffer! I wonder if it will cut him deeply, when I make him understand that we can be nothing more to each other than we have been? There can be no need that he should know what keeps us apart—that, at least, may be spared him. Would that I could bear all the pain, as I have done all the wrong! I feel as if Nemesis had begun to dog my steps; and that, once aroused, will not leave me till I am crushed. I could endure—not patiently, but with some resignation—while my perpetual throb of pain was solitary, but now there must be a dual consciousness of its misery; I feel it working me to madness. I cannot even get the consolation of thinking I should never have met him under other circumstances. He is Edwin's friend; we should have met and loved and been happy at home. And what can I say to him now? It is useless to pretend that I care nothing for him. He would not believe it now, and I could

not keep to that lie if I tried. I can only tell him I have private reasons which prevent my marrying. I wish we were at home. Here one has hardly a chance of two sentences together without being interrupted; and I am sure I shall make a more miserable muddle of the affair if I try to finish it on horseback. There are three days more before we shall get home, I suppose. I wish they were over. I suppose I had better take to the waggon."

Hester was mistaken in thinking she should reach home in three days. The next morning, though the wind had dropped, was still miserable and damp; besides which, so much rain had fallen that the roads were too slippery for the oxen to travel on.

Mrs. Cairns decided upon staying where she was for the next twenty-four hours.

Hester was miserable; had it been possible she would have ridden on alone in the misty rain.

Clare proposed that they should go on to the inn, and stay there with Mr. Cairns; but Mr. and Mrs. Tod would not hear of this.

Agnes came to pay them a visit during the morning.

"How did you all get on last night?" inquired Clare.

"Badly enough. You can't imagine what the wind was sometimes. Once the children kept crying for cake. Poor Aunt Mary thought she would get some for them out of the front box, and the wind

just caught her and blew her right into the box, and mother and I had to pull her out. But there was one thing I was thankful for—we hadn't got you and Lucy to trouble us."

"That is civil, Clare! What does she mean?" asked Hester. "I am sure you and I are meek enough in the waggon."

"Meek enough, if you like; but you feel yourselves martyrs. I don't wonder people got tired of Moses now and then. You are two such miseries that you can't go to sleep there like other people; and there you lie, perfectly still, not turning round and moving as anybody else would, but just feeling all night how miserable and virtuous you are."

"And this is all the thanks you get for enduring cramps without a groan, because you don't want to make everybody about you as wretched as yourself," said Hester.

"There—I knew it!" exclaimed Agnes.

"And weren't the people dreadfully wet?" asked Clare.

"Yes. It is a wonder old April did not boil himself outright when they got a fire to burn, in by the bushes. He just put his hands upon his knees and seemed to try how close down he could sit on the flames, till his clothes steamed like a pot of boiling water."

Mrs. Tod, who was present, laughed heartily.

"Those Kafirs will stand a good deal of heat before they are boiled or roasted," she said. "They don't mind being cooked themselves, and they like cooking things too—especially other people's. Elizabeth, I hear one of those turkey chicks hollering—run out and see what is the matter with it. Emma Jane, I think you might put on your new boots to-day. You have got a cold, and ought to stay in the house; so you won't mess them up."

"Mother, there's one elastic that isn't put in yet."

"Oh, is there? I thought I had finished." Then she explained to Clare—"They are some nice boots Mr. Tod bought at a sale. He got a dozen pairs cheap, and there wasn't anything the matter with them but the elastic; and the shoemakers wouldn't put in new elastics unless I'd pay 1*s.* 6*d.* a pair. As I wasn't going to pay that, I just got some elastic, and I'm fitting it in myself."

It had now stopped raining, and Hester went to the window and looked out. The poultry, which had been driven to seek what shelter was to be had, now flocked round the door and seized every chance of coming into the house, one daring cock even finding his way into the parlour. It was evident, however, from the mild way in which he was ejected, that he was a privileged offender. When Hester regarded the evident plenty which reigned within doors, she wondered to see the squalid appearance of things

without. The house was very roughly constructed, and was without porch or garden in front. A few uneven stones led up to the door, about ten yards distant from which was a little pool half covered with ducks, while pigs and fowls were evidently at free quarters wherever they liked to go.

"You are looking at my turkeys, Miss Cairns," said Mrs. Tod. "They are sixteen fine ones, ain't they? They ought to have been eighteen, but two of them went off, nobody knows where or how—but I do. Into some Kafir's pot, that's where; and they didn't walk in of themselves, that's how. I shall send these into Grahamstown in a week or two; they are worth ten shillings apiece there now."

"You don't seem to have any geese," said Hester.

"No, I gave up keeping them some time back. Mr. Tod didn't like them about at all. Whenever he hollered to the Kafirs, or one of the children, all the geese would holler too; and that made him feel like a goose himself, you see, and used to put him into a passion. So I gave them up—not but what I look upon them as very profitable things to keep. How often do you pluck yours?"

Hester was obliged to refer to Clare, who had been talking to Agnes.

"Mamma has it done once in two months."

"Ah, I used to do mine once in six weeks. You get a lot of down off them altogether, and it makes

a good price in town. But they kept stealing mine. I always said I knew who it was, but I could never catch them at it, though I tried ever so many times. I had got an old gander that was blind in one eye, and one day he was gone too. I suppose somebody must have got the blind side of him and knocked him over. I didn't mind that so much, for whoever had him must have felt like a fool at the catch, for he was nothing but skin and bones, and must have been as tough as leather; for I had him—let me see, Thomas James was the baby when I changed with Mrs. Nachtigal, and Harriet was the baby when he was carried off—yes, that was seven years I had him, and goodness knows how old he was when I had him! It's my belief he was no chick then. So somebody's jaws must have ached over his bones."

The weather cleared up about three o'clock in the afternoon, and, as everybody was tired of being cooped up so long, it was quickly decided to have the horses saddled and to ride to some orange gardens about a mile away.

Mrs. Cairns, Clare, Hester, and Agnes were going, when, just as they were starting, Frank and Bevil appeared and joined the party.

Mrs. Cairns acted as pilot, and Hester rode by her side till they reached the gate and dismounted.

The gardens were well worth a visit. There were groves of orange-trees, with flowers and fruit in every

stage, and rows of bananas shading walks by a little stream, on each bank of which clustered several kinds of ferns.

"What a lovely spray that is!" said Hester to Mrs. Cairns, pointing to an orange-tree as they passed.

"I will get it for you," said Bevil.

"Lucy, I would not have it if I were you!" exclaimed Agnes. "I am sure it is unlucky to wear orange blossoms—except, of course, when you ought to."

"There is no danger when I give them to you!" said Bevil.

"There is no risk at all to me. When a woman has made up her mind on a subject," said Hester, "it is not likely to be strengthened or weakened by a spray of flowers."

"'Trifles light as air,'" said Agnes, with mockery in her voice. "And he gives it with his left hand, too."

"He has scratched his right hand," said Hester, gravely. "Every flower here has a sharp thorn. Thank you."

"It is nothing," said Bevil.

As they approached the gate they divided into pairs.

"I am very sorry you got scratched," said Hester to Bevil.

"It is such a trifle that I can't even make it an excuse to ask you to tie it up for me. You have quite got over yesterday's battering about?"

She passed over his question.

"Please to let things be as they were before we left the sea, till we get home."

"You mean that you do not wish me to speak to your mother till the end of the journey? I will certainly wait if you think she will not mind it."

"No, it is not that," said Hester. "I want you to behave to me as you did—not to make any difference now."

"But Lucy, darling, don't you see that that is impossible? We cannot go back."

"It is that we may not have to go back, that I do not want to go forward."

"You are mysterious. Tell me what you mean."

"I mean that if you will not promise to treat me as you did before we left the sea, I must make the rest of the journey in the waggon."

"Of course I will promise to do my best, if you make such a point of it. But, Lucy, you should not feel so. Why should not all the world understand at once that we are to be man and wife?"

Hester's heart beat fast. What should she say? There was only time for one sentence, for they were at the gate, and the others were waiting already.

"All the world is very little to me," she answered.

"I am thinking solely of ourselves. I know you will keep your promise."

He put her on her horse, and she again rode by Mrs. Cairns, while he took his place by Agnes.

Hester was very uncomfortable, and a beautiful sunset and Mrs. Cairns's remarks upon it were all lost upon her. She felt that she had made a false move—she should have said more or nothing; and it irritated her to hear Agnes talking to Bevil with much spirit; then she was vexed with herself that she should let such a thing move her.

"I wonder if Lucy and Mr. Thurstan have had a tiff?" said Mrs. Cairns to Agnes as they stood by their fire. "She had hardly a word to say to-night, and I don't believe she heard half I said."

"I suppose they have," answered Agnes. "Poor man, I am sorry for him. I did my best to make him lively. I am sure a little change must be good for him, instead of always sticking by her. I've read somewhere—

> 'What mad lover ever died
> To gain a soft and gentle bride?
> Or for a lady tender-hearted,
> In purling stream or hemp departed?'

I think Lucy must have read it too, and made up her mind to have a little change by driving the man to despair. I don't see what they have to quarrel over."

Bevil kept his promise to the letter; but as he had said, it was impossible to go back to exactly the same position.

For several miles the next day the road lay across flats where there was plenty of cantering ground. At length the horses had to make their way up a magnificent path cut amongst and over a chain of hills, the tops of which were covered with scarlet heath; while in the kloofs tall trees, bright creepers, gay berries, and lovely ferns, wreathed and twined among the grey rocks, many of them sheer precipices down which one gazed upon a twinkling stream beneath.

Bevil began to talk of his home, the house, the garden, his relations, the church, and the people living near.

Then, later on, when they had got into the town, and the girls were together in the ladies' sitting-room, he came in with two letters.

"I have been to the post-office," he said. "The English mail is in. Here is a letter for Mr. Cairns."

"I will take it to him," said Clare. "I saw him come in a minute ago."

"I have had a letter from Carnsew," he said to Hester.

"Yes!" she said, eagerly turning towards him.

"I would read some of it to you if it did not seem like breaking my word."

"Do read it," begged Hester, longing to hear Edwin's letter at whatever cost.

"Don't you think I have good reason to be jealous of Carnsew?" he said.

"No," she answered gravely, "not the least—at least, how do I know what reason you may have?"

He laughed.

"Well, you shall hear what he has to say," and sitting down, he read her a description of the voyage to India.

Mr. Cairns and Clare came in as he finished.

"I am going up to the waggon," said Mr. Cairns. "Have you any message to send to Mrs. Dunstan? They will go on through the night."

"I may as well walk up with you," said Hester.

"I think you and Clare had better stay here quietly and rest yourselves. I mean to make for the house to-morrow, and it will be the longest ride either of you have ever had."

"The letter has come," he said to Mrs. Dunstan, when he reached the waggon. "Like a good many other things, a day behind the fair."

"Is he all right?" asked Mrs. Dunstan, anxiously.

"Oh ja. The letter might have been written by his mother — decent family, nice little property, steady as Table Mountain, no fool—but we had found out that for ourselves. Put it away in some safe place, Loote, when you and Aunt Mary have

read it. I shall like to look at it again when we get home. Campbell seems to be having a good time of it in the old country. He'll just spin some yarns when he gets back again, I'll bet a new hat."

The next day was, as Mr. Cairns had predicted, one of hard riding for the girls. But as they changed horses twice, and it was not a very hot day, the sight of the mountains was able to raise Clare's spirits, and bring a home-like feeling even to Hester.

About four o'clock they parted with Frank, and a couple of miles farther Bevil took the road to Groenbosch.

"I shall see you to-morrow," he said to Hester, as he shook hands with her.



## CHAPTER XXI.

### THE HOUR AND THE MAN.

"Love may sink by slow decay,
But by sudden wrench believe not
Hearts can thus be torn away."

THROUGH all the bustle of getting the house into order again, Hester kept thinking, "It is so hot to-day that he will not come." She felt it would be a respite of one day; and yet, like all short respites, it was but a doubtful blessing; for though she shrank terribly from the task before her, and from the blank her life would be again after that one interview, the looking forward to it must, she thought, be worse than the looking back upon it. She would see him no more, and probably would never hear his name mentioned for the future.

Late in the afternoon, Mr. Cairns and Agnes and

Rob came, and soon after Hester saw Bevil ride down the road to the house.

They were all in the sitting-room when his knock sounded at the door.

"Rob, there is a knock; will you open the door?" she said.

And Rob ushered in Bevil.

Mrs. Dunstan received him very pleasantly, having no little feeling of triumph in doing so before her nephew, when she thought how utterly his tactics had been wasted. Mr. Cairns, however, had no sense of humiliation, and greeted the new-comer with heartiness, too.

"Well, I suppose you have found out that this is one of the coolest rooms anywhere about, and worth going through that fiery furnace outside to get at."

"It is lucky we hadn't such a day yesterday, isn't it? It would have been horrible below the Randt," said Bevil.

"We never could have come on in it," said Mr. Cairns. "Nobody in the world could stand it. It's all very well for vermin — snakes and Kafirs and lizards; tortoises perhaps may be a little lively in it, but nothing higher could do anything on such a day."

"I wonder if Cetewayo was glad to get back to his native heat after the chilliness of an English summer!" said Bevil.

There came a guttural ejaculation in reply, not distinctly heard, but very distinctly understood by everybody.

"It wasn't the English people's fault if he was glad to get back. My bleeding country! It makes a man's blood boil to think of the way that blackguard was treated over there—giving his blood-dripping hand to the Queen. And then that fool of a woman who rushed at the butcher to give him a tribute the moment he gets to Plymouth. Ach! a tribute to the brute who had our wounded soldiers hacked up even before they were dead. I wish her hand had been struck with leprosy as she stretched it out."

"And then the sending out Indian shawls to his old wives," said Mrs. Dunstan. "Nice they must have looked after they had put them on, all smeared with fat and roue klip."

"It's a thousand pities the ship didn't meet with some accident going home. And it might so easily have been managed, too."

As Mr. Cairns was now started on a conversation that would probably turn to a monologue addressed to Bevil, Hester thought it a good chance to go and cut the bread for tea, and make the butter into dainty little rolls in the pantry.

She had learnt, and thought it probable that Bevil had learnt too, that the pantry is an extra sitting-

room, in fact is the most sociable of rooms, in parts of the colony, its limited space producing a confidential feeling; while the absence of chairs, which soon makes one dexterous in balancing on bins or resting one's back against a shelf, gives a freedom from restraint. Accordingly she invited Agnes to go with her while she made her little preparations.

"It hasn't taken you long to get the house right again, Lucy," said Mr. Cairns, when they were at tea.

"Hasn't she been quick?" said Agnes. "She has even got all the vases full of flowers."

"The women have taken such care of them while I was away that it would have been ungrateful not to enjoy them as much as I can at once," said Hester, though she knew that it was partly a desire that Bevil should find the house as bright as possible if he came, that had sent her out at sunrise to the little garden.

"I thought we should have had you sloping off again to pick figs," said Mr. Cairns.

"You see, I am not a snake, or a Kafir, or a tortoise," said Hester, "so I thought it would be better to stay indoors than to get a 'sunset'—as little Top told me the other day I should, if I went out without a hat. So you will have to put up with jam."

"Oh I can put up with the jam very well, if you can do without the fig-gathering."

"You see I have changed the place of the piano;

how do you like it there, Agnes?" Hester asked, anxious to escape from Mr. Cairns's dangerous raillery.

"I dare say it sounds better."

"You must sing something presently, Lucy, and let us hear," said Mrs. Dunstan.

After tea, Hester sang, "Why do summer roses fade?"

"Ach! why do you sing such dismal songs?" asked Agnes.

"Let us taste *your* ware," said Hester.

"Now I shall sing 'Twickenham Ferry.' It will put us in mind of our old boating pleasures—only it's a pity we hadn't any handsome young ferryman to pull us along."

"You are ungrateful," said Bevil; "what could you wish for more than the two fine young Kafirs who came so gallantly to your rescue?"

"Ach!" exclaimed Agnes, with a double dose of scorn, as she sat down to the piano. "You can't call them people."

From "Twickenham Ferry" Agnes went suddenly to a slow, sad piece of music, in which her father, lying back in his chair, joined with a peculiar flute-like accompaniment of his voice, as he often did when his daughters were playing. It was an accompaniment that always moved Hester vaguely, but so strongly that it required an effort of will for her to remain in the room.

To-night she took a sudden resolution. "I am a mean coward," she thought. "Where is the courage my ancestors must have had? I have no right to let things go on as they are. I will go out on the verandah, and he can follow me if he likes."

She found the air still hotter outside than indoors. There was no moon, and clouds had quickly gathered in the sky, making it quite dark. A solitary fire-fly went up and down the kloof; a cicala whirred in a neighbouring shrub.

Hester was feeling, more than thinking, of the difference between this scene and the home of her childhood, and longing hopelessly for the plash of cool waves upon rocks, and the rustling of gentle breezes among branches, when a flash of lightning, foretelling a storm, lit up the hills and valleys, the little garden and the Kafir huts on the opposite side of the kloof, for a moment. The next, Bevil was by her side.

"Shall we have a thunderstorm?" he said.

"I think so. You will not enjoy your ride home, I am afraid."

"I am not going to-night. Mrs. Dunstan has asked me to stay. Now tell me, Lucy, why you have avoided me and sent me to Coventry in this way."

"You can scarcely say I have avoided you," she said.

"I can, though. I am willing to allow you that I was wrong in taking so much for granted. Will you forgive me, dearest? At any rate I have left you no doubt as to what I wish. Will you be my wife, Lucy?"

For a moment she could not speak, and another flash turned the darkness into a lurid glare. Bevil, with a sudden heart-shaking, wondered what the agony of misery in her eyes meant.

"I love you with all my soul and strength," he said. "You do not doubt it, do you?"

"No," she said; "and yet I cannot be your wife."

There was silence, which seemed a vast space of time to Hester.

"Why not?" asked Bevil, hoarsely. "Think yourself, do you not belong to me? Is it not my privilege to cherish you and work for you. Surely I was not mistaken; I did not deceive myself——"

"No," said Hester, "you were not mistaken. It is no good my pretending I do not love you. You know it."

"Then there can be no——"

"Yes," she went on, interrupting him; "there is a reason why I cannot marry you, though I would give my two hands to be your wife. It is I who have to ask forgiveness of you," she cried. "But do not think I tried to win your love to throw it away.

house and the rain streamed down with fury; but in half an hour all was over, and Hester threw open her window and let a rush of the cool night-air into her room.

She was so tired that she slept well for a few hours, but when once awakened could not go off again. So she rose and read, straining every nerve in the effort to keep her mind fixed upon her book. Yet when morning came she could barely have told what she had been reading about. She felt that all was not ended yet between herself and Bevil.

"Yet what am I to say," she thought. "I can neither yield nor explain."

As she was pouring out the früh coffee, Bevil came out of his room and entered the pantry.

They greeted each other, and then Bevil stood waiting till the maid should go.

"Nantooke, take Mrs. Dunstan's coffee to her. You can fetch the kettle for yourself presently," said Hester, passing a cup to Bevil and taking one herself.

Neither spoke for a moment. At length he said, "You cannot expect me to take what you said last night as final. You will either take back your words or explain them, won't you?"

"No, I cannot. If I knew how to put the matter more strongly, I would. Now I can only say again, I cannot be your wife."

"Tell me one thing: are you the wife of any other man? Are you married already?"

"No, I could never marry any one. Please do not trouble about it any more, Mr. Thurstan. I am not worth it."

"But if you are not married, and we wish to marry each other, I can see no reason——"

"But there is a reason, though you cannot see it. Believe me, I would not sacrifice my own happiness for a whim, and I would still less sacrifice yours."

"Is it nothing that time will wear away?"

"No, a hundred years could make no more impression on it than a single day."

"Let me tell your mother what I wish?"

"I have no mother. You mean Mrs. Dunstan. She is not my mother: she adopted me in New Zealand. But this mistake is at least no deception of mine. I never proposed it. We are no relations."

"Not your mother!"

"No. And she cannot help us."

"Then your name is not really Dunstan?"

"No."

"Won't you tell me what your real name is?"

For a moment she hesitated whether she should tell him her Christian name. She longed to be called Hester once more. But she shook her head.

"And is this all you have to say to me, Lucy?"

"What can I say?" she cried. "It is torture to

me to know that I am a pain to you when I would have been only a happiness."

"I will go now," he said.

"Won't you stay for breakfast?"

"No. If it must be so, it is better for us both that I should go." He took her in his arms and she made no resistance. "Let me hear you call me Bevil once."

"Good-bye, Bevil."

"Good-bye, my darling. And shall I never know your name?"

"My Christian name is Hester."

"Hester—Hester. It does not seem to belong to you. Now I see that you were alone in the world when I met you first."

"Yes, 'solitary as a throb of pain,' as George Eliot said."

"You know, Hester, that that can never be again. Even though we are far apart, we are bound together by the strongest tie."



## CHAPTER XXII.

### REPENTANCE.

"But midst the crowd—
To hear, to see, to feel—
With none who bless us, none whom we can bless;
This is to be alone; this, this is solitude!"

BYRON.

OF course Mrs. Dunstan was obliged to know something of what had taken place. She was greatly disappointed, and got but poor consolation when she carried her vexation to the Cairnses.

"It is provoking," allowed Mrs. Cairns, "when everything was comfortably arranged for her."

But Mrs. Dunstan felt that, beyond a feminine interest in a love affair, the matter stirred her niece very little. It was no great personal annoyance to her.

"Ja, so it often is. 'The best laid plans of mice and men,'" said Mr. Cairns, slowly, from his sofa. "I always said there was no depending on what that girl would do."

"I am sorry for him," said Agnes, in a heat at once. "Yet I am sure I don't know why I should be. I don't suppose he will break his heart over what isn't worth the sacrifice."

"I am sorry for *her*," said Clare, quietly. "Her reason for not marrying Mr. Thurstan is not that she cares nothing about him."

"Ach! she would marry him fast enough if she wished to. You don't suppose she is like old Mr. Walden at that dance at the Christians' last year, hankering after what he'd no heart for, and staying there in the dancing-room till he was more than half asleep, and looking for all the world like a cock that had been fighting till he hadn't a leg to stand on or more than a gasp left. That's not her style."

"To look like a fighting-cock? No it isn't," said her mother.

"I say she is a flirt—not that she does not know her own mind. Only let anybody talk about me after this!"

"Nobody does," said Clare. "You do most of that yourself."

"Well, Clare, you can be nasty."

Then the elders thought it prudent to drop the

subject and introduce a fresh topic of conversation.

It wearied Hester to have to listen to Mrs. Dunstan's feeble remonstrances.

"My dear," she wailed, "it is not that I want to part with you—I should be lonely enough if you went: but it is not natural for a young girl like you to stay single. You don't feel it now, I suppose, while you are so good-looking and people think a good deal about you, but a married woman's position is a better one than a single woman's, and that you will feel sharply enough when you get middle-aged and I am gone, if you have made no new ties."

"I know already," said Hester, sadly, "that there are no birds in last year's nests."

"Well, I don't know about that exactly. Here the birds often use the same nests till they are worn out. But I know you can't be young for ever."

Hester had not even the spirit to laugh. "It would be almost more comfortable if she would blaze up and be really scorching. Then perhaps I could fancy I had some little grievance too, and get hot about it myself," she thought. "I wonder what I must do! If I try to live on this life much longer I shall go mad. I feel like a tiger in a cage—worse, if possible. Yet I know that there is nothing more fatally true than the old saying, 'What can't be cured must be endured.' Still, if cure is not possible, it is

as well to make endurance as light as one can. My wound is too raw, and my brain too hot, to let me think calmly now; I must wait a day or two before I decide on anything."

All the day she kept herself employed on active physical work, so that when night came she slept from sheer exhaustion. After that she gave her thoughts the rein.

She went over and over again her old reasons and arguments, but they would no longer satisfy her. In her illness at the sea she had felt and almost owned to herself what she had done, and though with desperate resolution she had tried to force the consciousness of it from her mind, she had only been able to half do so—it had haunted her like a terrible nightmare that would not be forgotten. Miserable, comfortless texts of Scripture would constantly present themselves to her mind, and in vain she tried to put them away, asking herself why, after so many years, she should allow them to have authority now. She tried to get comfort out of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac: if that was a holy action, why should hers be a sinful one? But it was no use; no parallels, no attempts at reasoning, would still her mind. "Will this Bible, that helps to torment me, give me no comfort too!" she wondered one night; and taking out one—valued because Joan had given it to her as a birthday gift—she opened it.

"Vengeance is mine, I will repay, saith the Lord," was the first passage that struck her, and she closed it again. Yet almost at the same moment Joan's voice came back to her ear, singing, "Oh rest in the Lord! Wait patiently for Him, and He shall give thee thy heart's desire." "I hardly know what my heart's desire may be now," she thought. "Peace, I suppose; a sense of relief from this brand of Cain upon my soul. May my mind be cleared of these fearful doubts—or may the end come quickly." Again and again she silently prayed for clearness of vision.

One day Mrs. Cairns's nurse brought the youngest child to spend a few hours at the cottage, as she often did. Having deposited her charge in the sitting-room she of course retired to amuse herself with the housemaid by playing five notes over and over a million times on a little flute, and beating her bare feet on the ground, in the sunshine behind the house.

The child was inclined to be very noisy, and upset a chair or two in her romps.

"I wish you would take Loom out on the verandah for a little while, Lucy," said Mrs. Dunstan. "It is cool enough, I think. I don't feel well, and her shouts are making my head dreadful."

"Will you come with me outside, Loom?" asked Hester, well knowing she was in a land where

children are not to be induced to do anything against their inclinations, without their calling upon their lungs to make a desperate resistance by doing their utmost to deafen one.

Loom was willing to have a change; so Hester took her, and a variety of trifles for her to play with, to the verandah, and then sat down on a chair with a book, that she might be at hand to prevent a clearance of buds from the rose-bushes or a bath in the neighbouring tank.

Hester sat back in her chair with her hands behind her head, her eyes gazing on the kloof in front, but seeing nothing of it. Her thoughts went back to the moment when she stood on the sands with her uncle. His two sovereigns had "helped her on her journey." She had them carefully put away still, apart from the provision she had thought fit to make for sickness or death. She knew that she had never loved her uncle half so much before as she had then, or felt so sorry for him; and the one thing that gave her a moment's relief in her despair was the thought that if he knew all about it he would not hate her for what she had done. She had never meant to injure him. "I have not sinned against him," she thought, "but I suppose it is against that all-wise and all-just God."

"Lucy," cried a shrill commanding little voice at her elbow.

Loom was tired of spanning in shells for oxen, and telling astonishing stories of "the jackal" to her doll, so she had dragged a chair close to Hester, and was kneeling upon it with her face to the back.

"Tell me 'Our Father.'"

For a moment Hester hesitated, but she would not cast the shadow of her doubts upon the child's mind by a show of reluctance, so she complied.

The earnestness of the child, and the simplicity of her faith, touched Hester much. She could remember when she, too, had believed as thoroughly. Joan had done so still when she was grown up. Hester felt that she was indeed moving by degrees towards, not exactly her old blind faith, and certainly not to any formal creed, but to something of her old belief.

She had always been a girl of action, and her physical vigour had prevented her from breaking down mentally during the years of her isolation. Now, having decided that she had sinned deeply and terribly, she decided too that an active punishment must be endured; a passive submission to the reproaches of conscience was not enough for her. Fears for the next life did not trouble her much—she left that to a Judge who tempers justice with mercy; she repented of her sin—even though it had fulfilled all her wishes, she repented of it. Quite apart from the misery it had brought, she was sorry for it.

The obligation of action was, however, much sooner decided upon than the course of it could be. She knew that her life with Mrs. Dunstan, though she could not be entirely happy in it, was comparatively a very pleasant one for her; and she felt that Mrs. Dunstan's affection was a prop on which she had learned to lean for support. Sometimes the thought would come that this affection had forged a bond between them which it was her duty not to sever. But then she reflected that she would not have hesitated to sever it by marriage, had that been open to her, when she would have been happier instead of less happy for doing it; and she knew, too, that Mrs. Dunstan would willingly have had it so broken.

Sometimes she thought of the command that a life must be given for a life, and the question as to whether or not she ought to give herself up for public retribution could not fail to arise with it. But she considered that no public end could be answered by that, as without doubt her uncle's death had been looked on as the result of an accident; and the private misery it would bring on the innocent members of her own family must be beyond calculation. So that idea was put away at once and for ever.

## CHAPTER XXIII.

### NEMESIS.

"He loves and he rides away."

FORESHADOWING her departure, a sharpened affection for everything around her came upon Hester. The barren and forsaken look of the land turned to breadth and freedom. She had always liked to watch the bull majestically marching home with his train of cows to their milking, as if it was his duty and privilege to be always at hand to protect them from wrong; and it had been a pleasure to see the flocks of beautiful Angora goats, and the sheep that had been lost amongst the hills during the day, winding home to the kraals in the evening by their thousands. She even looked now with a keener interest at the mad waltzing of the ostriches on a dewy morning.

One cool afternoon she took her paint-box, and, followed by Hero, the old dog, who took it as a matter of course that he should go wherever she did, went up the road to sketch the house and kloof. She did not perhaps get the best spot for her view, but she felt obliged to avoid the open ground and choose a seat by a clump of bushes, amongst which was rather a large elephant boem, in which, in case a stray ostrich came that way, she could take refuge till a chance passer-by might rescue her.

She worked for an hour with very divided thoughts, wondering how she should best break the news to Mrs. Dunstan that she could not stay much longer with her. Hester had not decided on what she would do, and had put off speaking of her probable departure from day to day as Mrs. Dunstan was not well.

She thought, too, much of Bevil Thurstan, wondering where he was. She had heard nothing of him since the last week, when he had left her.

Suddenly Hero raised his head and gave a very low growl. Hester sprang to her feet, for though no coward, she never forgot that she was in a land where antagonistic races dwelt side by side. A colonial girl would probably have known in an instant that the horseman she saw in the distance was a white man, but, as it was, she first recognized the rider by the horse. Then she knew that Bevil was coming to her once more, and she stood waiting to receive him.

"I find you upon a wish," he said as he dismounted. "I shall take it as a good omen."

"Do you believe in omens?" she said, giving him her hand; "I should not have expected that."

"Not always. But small weights sometimes turn great balances."

"I thought you might perhaps have gone home," she said.

"You are a countrywoman of mine, then?" he asked.

"You cannot infer that. I spoke of your home."

"But your voice spoke of yours, too. No, I could not sail till I had seen you again. I shall leave on Friday, unless I can persuade you to go with me—then I suppose you will not be willing to make your preparations in quite such a hurry."

"That is an impossibility. I am so glad to see you once more, but don't let that question come up again. No good can come of it. It only makes things worse to talk of them when there is no end to be gained."

"Listen, Hester—Yes," he said, seeing her start at hearing the name, "you will always be Hester to me now—I have thought this matter over, and I have decided that it is not well that you should be the only judge of the case. Men and women look at many things differently, and I claim at least the right to know what it is that keeps me and the woman I

want to marry asunder. You still object to telling it to me?"

She moved her head in assent.

"And Mrs. Dunstan cannot tell me?"

"Oh no, she knows no more than you."

"Very well; then only let me know where I can get the knowledge. I will go to New Zealand or America, or anywhere, for an explanation."

"I believe no one on earth knows it but myself."

"Then take courage, and tell me yourself. Depend upon it, it is some mole-hill which your womanly purity has turned into a Himalaya of difficulty to your mind. I should be your husband, you know—the man to whom your troubles should be as his own. Rest your head on my shoulder and let me put my arm around you, and so let me hear the worst."

"Oh no. Don't you see I should go mad to be pushed away from you? Let me think for a moment what I should do."

"When a woman hesitates she is lost," he thought. "I only need have patience."

Hester sat down again on her campstool and tried to think. Must part of her punishment be to degrade herself in the eyes of the man she loved? That would be worse than anything she had yet undergone. Yet it seemed that it must be so. She had been making up her mind that whatever punishments

presented themselves she must accept, if not willingly, at least submissively—and now came this. Nothing could well be harder to bear. And was it not her duty? Did she not owe it to Bevil to try to cure him of the love he had so unhappily given to her? There could be surely no more effectual way of doing that than to show him how unworthy she was of it. It was true, he had a right to know.

She rose, and, standing by a branch of a tree, faced him.

"It is not one of the trifles you speak of," she said distinctly; "I have a murder on my soul."

There was silence for a moment. Hester could hear the sound of tiny insects that moved among the karoo, and she knew afterwards that a locust had flown past her on scarlet wings. Then Bevil said—

"You are right; that is no trifle. But explain this to me: do you mean that you are actually guilty in your own person; or is it that you are one of those innocent victims who feel reproach cling to them from the evil deeds of those connected with them?"

"I am verily guilty."

Then a silence that could scarcely be breathed in fell upon them. It seemed a lifetime to Hester before Bevil made a slight movement. She thought he was going to mount his horse and leave her without another word.

"Stop," she cried. "Indeed you must. Having said so much I must say more."

"She is mad," was his thought. "That illness she had at the sea has crazed her on this point. She could not commit a murder. I have no doubt she is Mrs. Dunstan's daughter after all. That infernal heat they had the day they started was enough to give anybody a sunstroke. I only wonder it didn't kill the girls outright."

Then he recollected her face the first time he saw it, and his thinking then that it was the saddest he had ever seen. He tried to picture for a moment what she would look like with flashing eyes striking at some one with a knife, or suddenly drawing a revolver; but his mind refused to raise that picture, and instead there came one of a girl on a bright stretch of sand, running after an old man and throwing her arms around him. He thought of Ayacanora—there was no blame attached to her for the blood she had shed: might it not be possible that the girl before him was equally guiltless?

"I am not going away yet," he said. "Tell me whatever you like."

"I have permission now, not entreaty," thought Hester, bitterly, and she began her story. "Years ago, when I was a child, I had a home," she said gravely.

Her simple statement of such an ordinary fact

showed such a sense of what was lacking to her now, that his heart yearned to her afresh. She paused a minute to find convenient words.

"It was not in a place like this, where the land seems unable to take a hold on people, and where a trek scarcely moves the heartstrings more than a pleasure-trip does. Do you know what it is to have a home where not only you were born, but your father before you, and your grandfather and his—a home where every tree that is growing and every stone that is placed upon another is sacred to you, because it has been planted or put there by hands long since turned to dust, by ancestors who have handed it down to you to cherish in your turn?"

She was speaking quickly and with a great deal of energy now.

"I know something of the feeling, but not so strongly as you, I expect."

"That was the home I had in childhood and girlhood, and it seems to me now that I drew my very life as much from the place as from the people who were about me. Then came troublous times for us. I had near relatives then who loved me, and whom I loved intensely too. We all felt our troubles, but I do not think any of the others felt them so keenly as I did—perhaps because I had gradually lost the faith, not in God's power, I think, but in many of His

attributes, which soothed and comforted some of them when I was driven to despair."

She stopped again for a minute, looking towards the mountains, and he stood patiently waiting. He felt now, he knew not why, that she was indeed telling him the truth, and he could not move till she had finished.

"When we were children we never knew that this house was only ours by sufferance; and even when we grew to know it, we did not realize it till the awful possibility of our being uprooted brought the fact close to us. The actual owner was a near relation of my father's, a very old man without children. Our father was his heir-at-law, and had been treated by him and every one else for years as the next possessor of the estate, though it was not entailed. At least, I should say he was treated so by all but one person. My father even laid out considerable sums of his own money in improving the estate, without receiving a word of warning that the land was not his own. If our uncle had married and given us a nearer heir, I should have felt that it was hard upon us personally, but still not unjust; but he did not do that. He became so listless and enfeebled that he very rarely went off the place, and often for days never left the house. But his mind got more decrepit even than his body. He had had an accident long before I could remember, in which he had injured his head, and the

effects never entirely wore off. As he grew in age he got miserly—never with me, though—and my father's carelessness about money matters irritated him. In his dotage this irritation was skilfully worked upon by a cousin of my father's—a man not even bearing our name, and not in quite the same social position as we were. In time this man got to haunt our uncle, and gained such influence over his poor tottering mind, that he declared the estate would be in better keeping in his horny hands than in the softer ones of my father. I was sorry for my uncle; I had pitied him for years, for one by one the little pleasures of his life were shut out, and it became a dull, grey expanse of stifling discontent. He had been very kind to me in my childhood, and even in his madness he determined to provide for me. I, too, had tried to bring some little relief into his old age, but after I had read a good deal about euthanasia, I thought that the greatest relief for him would be to get rid of all troubles of body and mind together. His life was miserable, and he was deciding on an act of great injustice, not only to those living, but to the dead who had left the place in his charge. If he knows all about it now, he must be thankful to me for having saved him from it. I put a dose of laudanum into some medicine he had to take. He has cause to be thankful, but I have to be sorry for it all my life. I can feel now that I was wrong to

put out a human life which, however unhappy and harmful it might be, God did not extinguish."

There was silence for some minutes after she had finished; then Bevil asked—"And your friends?"

"They never knew—I hope they never knew. I could not live with them afterwards, but have been a vagabond on the face of the earth ever since."

"Hester, I allow that your obstacle is too great for us to disregard. But I must repeat what I said the last time we spoke of it. Should you ever be in any perplexity or trouble in which I can be of any use, you must apply to me in the full certainty that, until death comes between us, all help and comfort that I can give you, you can claim. Is there anything I can do for you now?"

"No, thank you; my wants are all out of reach. So you sail on Friday. I wish you a good voyage," she added, as he was going to mount.

He saw her raise her arms and take hold of a higher branch; and a crowd of trifles rushed on his mind, melting into a whole. The attitude was the same as that of the girl he had seen embracing the tottering old man, and there was the same expression of mute agony on her face. "Hester Carnsew," came to his lips, but was not uttered.

He turned to her again, and taking a letter from his pocket-book he handed it to her.

"I have just heard again from Carnsew. Perhaps

his letter may interest you a little. I think I can remember everything that is in it."

"He may marry somebody and make a good husband," thought Hester, in her desolation after he was gone; "but I believe he will never love any other woman as he would have loved me. He seems able to divine what will give me pleasure."

## CHAPTER XXIV.

### AN AFRICAN DERBY DAY.

STILL the problem of Hester's future life remained unsolved to her. There constantly recurred to her mind the idea of the old Mosaic law, that a life must be given for a life; the avenger of blood being the next-of-kin. Was she not herself next-of-kin in this case? Was it her duty to be the victim and the avenger?

She thought of ways in which she could put an end to her existence without having the odium of suicide cast over her memory. She felt that death would be light compared with the other way she had thought of—cutting herself off from physical ease and mental repose. To become an attendant in a lunatic asylum would be the most effectual way of doing that, she considered. She could think of

nothing more repugnant to her than being constantly surrounded by mad people, even if she were ministering to their necessities.

She felt sorrow that was akin to self-reproach when she thought of leaving Mrs. Dunstan lonely in her declining age. Why had she allowed herself to stay so long with one person that Time had forged a kind of bond between them? It seemed cruel to try and break it now. Still, it was chiefly a feeling of unrest in her uncertainty as to Bevil's movements that prevented her deciding on any course of action. Since he had once appeared to her when she had least expected him, she looked for some sign that he was really out of reach. But no one mentioned him either to her or in her presence.

"I think we will go to town, Lucy," said Mrs. Dunstan, one morning at breakfast.

"To town!" exclaimed Hester, in a tone she might have used if it had been the Sandwich Islands. She had been thinking so much of her own feelings and actions, that any little ordinary variation in their quiet life seemed startling to her.

"Yes," said Mrs. Dunstan. "I don't get quite well, and shall see a doctor; and you want a little change too. You have been much too quiet lately."

"It is not yet a month since we came from the sea," said Hester, feeling at the same time that it seemed much more like a lifetime.

"I don't mean that you have not been about enough," explained Mrs. Dunstan. "But since you sent off Mr. Thurstan you have not been like the same girl. I am afraid, my dear, that you have made a great mistake."

Hester would not carry on a conversation on that subject, and nothing more was said about going to town till Mr. Cairns came to the cottage in the afternoon.

"I tell you what I will do if you like," said Mr. Cairns. "I want to go in to the stock fair next week, and there are those races down the Randt on Tuesday. Of course you will want to go to them. I will have the four horses put in the cart and take you down to the races, and then we can drive right on to town afterwards."

"We couldn't get to Grahamstown the same night after the races, could we?"

"No; but we can sleep somewhere on the road—at Kelly's, or some other house."

"Yes, at Kelly's. I like an inn better than going to anybody's house; and you are more independent, and can start at whatever time you like in the morning. But, Andrew, isn't Loote going to the races? And the girls too?

"Of course; but they must take the waggon. There are all the children, and the food, and the pots and kettles. Loote might come in the cart too, but

you won't get her to do it, that I know. She likes sticking to the waggon and the children on a journey, and never thinks how much more seedy she looks at the end of a pleasure-trip than at the start. Even if you took your cart, and I took mine, the waggon would have to go too, for they have made up their minds to spend the evening before at the Christians', and there are sure to be so many people there that it will be a toss up to get a place to put your head into for the night. Besides, Loote likes to have the waggon for a sleeping-place for herself and the children. What horse are you going to back, Lucy?"

"I am afraid I have not thought much about it. Are you going to run a horse? I will wear your colours if you like."

"I am sorry I sha'n't have the honour. I haven't run a horse for twenty years, I believe."

"Frank Turner is going to have one there, isn't he? What is it called—Hurricane?"

"Yes."

"Well, we must all think him perfection, to please Clare."

Agnes was so full of the races that they became the chief topic of conversation in the two households, and Lucy received a special visit from her on the subject.

"Lucy, you know that Frank is going to enter Hurricane for the Ladies' Purse. And some of the

stewards have asked us to make the purse. Now how shall I make it? I don't want to give them just a little velvet sack, that any fool could have made. And Clare is so taken up with getting Frank's colours into everything she has on, that she can't think about anything but making herself hideous. I hope we sha'n't see her come out in pink boots."

"I don't think you need trouble yourself about her going so far as that," said Hester; "Clare always manages to make herself look the lady she is."

Then the two girls put their heads together and designed a wonderful sporting purse, intended to represent a horse's hoof and shoe, and embellished on the reverse side with cap and whip and spur.

Hester was surprised at herself, and a little shocked at the unmistakable interest she showed and felt in the proceedings.

It was a pleasant afternoon on which they started, and though there were no trees to help the coolness, there were bushes enough to relieve the eyes from the arid glare of the road and veldt. The curtain at the back of the cart was rolled up, and when the horses trotted off at their full speed the breeze lulled Hester into a state of quiescence in which she was conscious of little except the pleasure of rapid motion. Of course boulders and ditches in the middle of the road—some naturally worn by thunder-storms, some made by farmers to carry water to the

vleys and dams—are apt to rouse the traveller to other sensations sometimes; but experience had taught Hester to pack herself with some security, and her length of limb prevented her being thrown helplessly about like an indiarubber ball, which is too often the fate of smaller people.

They passed over the breezy randt, and wound their way amidst a maze of kloofs down the other side, where every few minutes a group of pheasants, or a brighter patch of flower-colouring, would catch Hester's attention.

When they arrived at the Christians' house the greatest bustle was to be discovered inside and out. Three or four dogs gave each new-comer a welcome that was more vigorous than enjoyable, though as the visitors were all without a suspicion of "colour" they were much too well-bred to seriously attack them.

Presently a bell summoned the elders to dinner, and afterwards the younger people went in by turns with much noise and merriment.

After dinner Hester was accosted by one of the stewards. "Miss Dunstan, I am sure you can write well."

"Your surety comes from ignorance, I suppose. You have never seen my writing."

"I can't say that I have; but I want you to help me. I have lots of things to attend to, and I don't

want to spend all the night filling in programmes, you see."

"I will willingly help. But let me have one to copy and show you first. I think my writing, if not beautiful, is readable."

"I knew you would. See here—this is all you have to do. Here, these are the Trial Stakes. Put Mr. Vanderheit's Emperor first; and here are to come the colours, purple and orange. You understand it all, don't you?"

So Hester soon found herself at a table with a pile of programmes before her. Two other ladies came to help her at her work.

"What are you doing?" exclaimed Agnes, coming in. "Filling in programmes? Oh, I am sure I can't do that! I could never get my writing small enough. I couldn't now, Clare, could I? Is there any other way I can help you, Mr. Christian?"

"Sing something to us," said one of her numerous cousins who were present.

"Ach! Before so many people? How could I sing with a hundred and fifty people about?"

"You are talking tall. There aren't so many as that, unless you count the Kafirs and the nurses; and I suppose you don't mind singing before that class of animal."

"Of course I don't count them. But there are too many people."

"The more the merrier! And there's one thing, if there are a lot of people, some of them are sure to enjoy your singing if they don't all like it."

"You are very rude, Malcolm. I am not going to sing for you after that;" and she drew herself up with some appearance of anger.

"Oh yes, you are."

"No, I am not."

"Come along."

He made his way to the piano and opened it, and she followed him.

"But I don't know anything! What shall I sing? I haven't any songs that are worth singing."

However, in a minute she *was* singing, and during her first song there was a hush in the clamour, but at the second there was a loosening of tongues, and flirting became general under the very eyes of fathers and uncles, whose youth, however, was left such a little way behind, that they were more inclined to look leniently on the doings of the second generation than most "family men." The mothers were mostly engaged in trying to soothe refractory infants, who preferred their cots at home to sleeping in waggons or on floors.

One girl after another played and sang, and dancing would certainly have been proposed had there been a possibility of carrying out the proposal. But the house was too full—there was barely

standing room, certainly no turning room. The one sitting-room had overflowed, and the little pantry opening from it was full, and so was the verandah.

But presently some of the stewards began what produced a certain amount of quietness—the business of the lotteries.

Almost every one had a ticket, the ladies as well as the men, but when they were sold the bidding was confined to the men.

Hester, who had never seen anything of the sort before, was struck with admiration of the talent of the gentleman who disposed of them to the highest bidder. It was the same man who had asked her to help with the programmes.

The points he found in favour of each horse that had been entered were marvellous; and the calm way in which he seemed willing that listeners should infer that he might have been puffing before, but that *this time* at least all was true, was astonishing to the girl, who hated trickery, especially in small things.

"That man—Mr. Barton, I mean—missed his vocation when he decided to be a farmer," she said quietly to Mr. Cairns, who was by her. "He should have kept to towns and have been a cheap-jack."

"Well, Miss Dunstan," he said, coming to her after he had finished; "have you done the programmes? I am really very much obliged to you.

How do you like it all? It's a bit of rousing up for our sleepy lives, isn't it? You see, if we didn't get a good rousing sometimes, we should half of us go off the reel. How such lots of these fellows can stay at home as they do day after day and week after week, and sleep three-quarters of the day, and smoke with their tongues tied the other quarter, I can't imagine. It would drive me mad. I can't stand it; I must have a little life. That selling was done in something like style, wasn't it? Make a noise, and don't mind how often you say the same thing over and over again; only say it well, say it well—remember there's no good if you make a mess of it—and say it fast. That's the way to get a hearing. I saw you admired the way the thing was done."

"I think you are wasted on a farm," said Hester, reserving to herself this time what she thought he would not be wasted on.

"Do you? Well, so do I; so do I. There's no life to be had there. You can knock down a Kafir now and then; but even then you have the chance of being summoned to answer for it now."

At length there was a movement as though the evening was over; but what became of the people Hester never knew. For once she felt thankful to have the waggon to turn to for a haven of rest.

But though there might be rest, there was not much sleep for her. There was dancing at the Kafir

huts, and the singing and clapping of hands sounded musical coming through the night air. Nearer voices came from the house, where diminished talking and laughing seemed to go on for hours.

And once Hester, lying with her head against the sail of the tent, heard voices and footsteps approach so near that she could not fail to hear what was said. She supposed the speakers were leaning on the fence by which the waggon had been drawn up. She recognized one voice as that of John Davenant; the other she did not know.

"Turner's horse hasn't a chance," she heard the stranger say, and she knew, by the slightest possible movement, that Clare was awake as well as herself.

"The horse is out of condition altogether," assented Davenant.

"I'd scratch him if he was mine," said the other.

"A good deal may depend on the jockey. I don't know who Turner's going to put on him; if it is one of those black fellows, he will be nowhere."

"It won't make any difference. Why, Craven has brought down his Sultan to run for the Ladies' Purse, and Sandilli's entered. It will be between those two. Hurricane's ticket, you see, went for next to nothing. Nobody thinks he will do anything."

"He *can* run," said Davenant; "I've seen him run very well."

"I'd never back him for a shilling. Why didn't your cousin stay for the races? You ought to have got him to. He was talking of them a month ago, and gave me a couple of guineas for them."

"You see he will be back in time for the Derby, and no end of things of that kind at home; so of course he wouldn't care much for these little concerns we get up out here in the country. Still he did mean to stay till after them. He had to go home on some important private business, I believe."

"He and Turner were always running about together. I thought he had found something to keep him a spell in the colony—Agnes Cairns, or that Miss Dunstan."

"I thought myself that Dunstan girl could do what she liked with him. But perhaps she did not want to keep him in the colony. I don't know. Anyhow, he went off in a tremendous hurry. Whatever it was that called him home it wasn't anything to be trifled with. He said there was a possibility of his coming out again in two or three months, so perhaps he may not have altogether thrown up his little game."

"Well, I know I wish I could afford to rush home and out again whenever the fancy took me."

"Yes, I should not mind being as independent as he is either. I suppose we might have our chance if we went to the Diamond Fields."

"I can't tell. Our chance just now would be more likely to throw away the little we have. I say, I wonder if we ain't giving somebody a benefit of tobacco-smoke in that waggon? It's well tied down; I expect there are some kinder inside."

"I think it is the Cairns's waggon, so I dare say there are. We'd better loop."

Hester lay as she was—careful not to betray to Clare by any movement that she was awake too.

She had started in the afternoon with a feeling that she might possibly see Bevil Thurstan, and had hastily scanned the groups around the house when she came. Now she knew he was gone, and her mind was soon made up. This place that had known her should know her no more. Did he really intend to return? For a moment she wondered if he could mean to tell her tale, and if retribution in the repulsive form of public disgrace was to come upon her; but she put it away at once. She knew her secret was as safe with him as it had been so many years with herself.

She would go now as soon as she could possibly get away, and if he did return her presence should not trouble him again. She would speak to Mrs. Dunstan about it directly they got to Grahamstown, and then they would have a good opportunity of getting some one to come and live with her, when she herself left. There was no perplexity in her

mind as to where she should go—that seemed to have settled itself. When she went, it would be to England she would make her way; she would see again with her eyes the places she loved so well: perhaps even one more sight of beloved faces might be granted to her; and after that there was a blank.

She would return to her old name of Lucy Browning. There would be no fear of any one's recognizing her, for even Edwin her own brother had failed to do it. Bevil Thurstan was the only person who would know her if he saw her, and she thought it very unlikely they should meet. She would not be going into Yorkshire, and though they might happen to be in London at the same time, she had no fear that they would run against each other there.

While she still lay thinking of these things dawn came, and she heard a party of men, who wished to try their horses early on the course, start; and soon there was a general stir, oxen and horses were being brought to the homestead.

As Mrs. Cairns had declared her intention of going on the course to breakfast, because she was anxious to get her waggon in a good position, the girls thought it wise to rise as soon as there was daylight, that they might get the chance of going into the house to do their ablutions.

When the journey was resumed, Hester gave up

her seat in the cart to Agnes, and after a couple of hours' jolting they got to the course.

Mrs. Cairns gave her directions clearly, and her men skilfully managed to draw her waggon up close by the winning-post.

"You have had no breakfast, Frank, have you?" she said, as Frank Turner came up to say good morning.

"Not even a cup of coffee."

"Nor have we. You will come and have some with us in a few minutes. Make haste with the fire, Meeke, and get the sausages on."

"You make me feel as if I had had nothing good for a week when you speak of them," said Frank.

"I like something warm in the mornings. I think you want it when you are with the waggon, too. I don't like cold victuals. Ask Mr. Christian to come, or anybody else who has been here all the morning. I am sure they will be glad of a cup of coffee."

The girls put on their best hats and shook themselves out as well as they could, and then scrambled down to get out the cups and saucers and cut the bread. Other friends came up, and soon there was a very merry breakfast-party around the waggon.

"We have got up our appetites, Mrs. Cairns. I am afraid we shall eat you out," said Mr. Christian.

"There is plenty more in the waggon," said Mrs.

Cairns, untroubled. "Mr. Craven, won't you have another meat-pie, or a sausage? Why you haven't your tea yet! You said you would have tea, didn't you? Nantooke! Where have the women all got away out of sight? Clare, do you see Nantooke?"

"No, Mamma."

"Rob, do run over to the fire and bring back the teapot with you."

Presently Rob was seen to come round the corner of the waggon and suddenly collapse, seating himself on the ground and blowing at his fingers.

"What's the matter?" demanded his mother. "Have you upset the teapot?"

"There's been a sorrowful accident," said Rob, with a comic dolefulness. "First Meeke hit the teapot against the iron pot, and broke off a bit of the spout; and then April was going to fill it for her and knocked off the handle with a blow from the kettle; and now I can't carry it more than two steps at a time, and then I get scalded. I wish somebody else would take a turn at it now. Anybody's welcome to the job for me."

"Why did I bring a teapot that *could* be broken!" exclaimed Mrs. Cairns; "I might have known they would manage to do it somehow. Now we sha'n't be able to have a cup of tea in comfort till we get home again, unless we can borrow a teapot of somebody. Come and fetch a table-napkin, Rob; then

you will be able to get it here without scalding yourself."

"You will never guess when those sausages were made, Frank," said Clare, wishing to bury the teapot at once.

"The most unlikely place I can think of is coming down in the waggon."

"That would be sheer impossibility. But they were really made after you left on Monday night. Do you know, Mr. Christian, he came on Monday afternoon just before tea, and brought his two cousins to learn to dance. So, if you please, Agnes and I had to spend the evening waltzing with them. I am sure mother's arms must have ached with playing for us."

"No they did not."

"So when they went away about ten o'clock we just remembered that there were all the sausages still to make; so Agnes and I had to stay up and do it, and we didn't get through them till twelve."

"You should have told us when we began breakfast, then we should have enjoyed them still more," said Mr. Christian. "Mrs. Cairns, I see another waggon coming; may I have it drawn up in a line with yours? Then we will manage to rig up some sort of tent for the children to take refuge in, by throwing a buck-sail from the top of one waggon to the other. I am afraid it is going to be a hot day,

and half the children will be getting sunstroke or croup, or nobody knows what, if we don't do something for them."

"It will be a very good plan," assented Mrs. Cairns. "Then they will be under shelter, and will be out of the way of any horse that may be straggling about."

While the Kafir women hastily washed the cups and saucers, the stewards arranged their nursery, to the great comfort of many fond parents.

"That tent for the children is a splendid idea of Christian's, Loote," said Mr. Cairns, when he saw it. "You've only got to see that the women keep them in there, and they will be all right."

The children in this case meant the infants of very tender years, for Hester was presently surprised to hear him asking his boys, down to four years old, what money they had, and stimulating them to bet threepences and sixpences upon the horses they wished to win when they were cantered round.

The boys chose their favourite without hesitation, and staked their money willingly. But though they watched the races with the keenest interest, and shouted and danced when he was ahead, it was because it was "my horse," not because they might win or lose themselves. Their opportunities of spending money were too rare, and their facilities for getting it too easy, for them to mind losing it.

The Cairns's waggon served for a grand-stand while each race was being run, the rail along the side bearing up a row of spectators, and the vore-cheist and front of the waggon being crowded with ladies and children.

Hester was very fond of racing of all kinds, but when the Ladies' Purse was to be run for her attention was very much divided between the people around her and the race itself.

Before the start, two or three of the men who had horses in it came to see that their wives and children were in as good positions as they could be got into.

"So you are here with Mrs. Cairns, Alice," said Mr. Craven. "You couldn't get a better place to see from, could you? We go off to the starting-point in a minute."

"Oh, I hope they won't be long," said the wife. "I am getting nearly out of my mind with excitement, as it is. Mrs. Cairns will think me quite silly if it lasts much longer. Sultan looked well as he cantered past, didn't he?"

"Yes. If you get so excited as this, Alice, I shall have to give up running horses. Where is Alic? Are you all right there, my boy? Can you see the course well? Sultan is going to run now, and if he comes in first you must cheer, you know."

"All right—hurrah!"

"Never mind now; wait till the time comes.

Take care you don't fall off. I suppose, Alice, that girl has got the baby in the tent? Didn't he sound a little croupy yesterday? It is too hot for him to be out."

"Yes; but when the races are run she will slip out to look. I can't help it."

"That's only just for a minute or two. It will teach the child to take a proper interest in his father's concerns. Well, I must be off. You have your glass?"

Frank Turner's mother stood quietly on the ground by the winning-post, too excited to bear the clamour of her younger children, who were packed into her Cape-cart close by, and not caring for the conversation that went on at the moment in the waggons.

An old lady, Frank's grandmother, stood by Hester, who was surprised at the wildness of her interest.

"Are they off, my dear?" she asked. "My eyes are not what they were, and I can't see all that way."

"Yes; and they are all well together," said Hester.

"Now I can see them; they are coming round the bend."

Then for a few moments there was silence; every one was too intent on using his eyes to think of his tongue, when Bertram, a Cairns of four years, shouted,

"Hurricane is the frontest one, Clare; I can see him. Hurrah! hurrah!"

"Hush," said Clare, "they aren't in yet."

But Hurricane, having taken the lead, kept it, and won the heat by a length.

"I am simply disgusted with Sultan," said his owner's wife. "But I think Mr. Turner has much the best jockey."

"Yes," said Mrs. Cairns, politely, "he rode him very well, didn't he? It was lucky Frank was able to get an English jockey."

"I am glad he never used the whip. He never did once that I saw," said Clare.

"I'm glad Hurricane's winned the race," said Bertram.

"Are you? But he hasn't won it altogether; he has to run once more presently. Then we shall know."

"What's he got to go again for? That's not fair. When I and Jack run a race, if I'm there first I've winned it."

"Oh yes, it is fair for horses," said Clare, finding assertion come easier at the moment than explanation.

The second heat was more closely contested. When Hurricane came within twenty yards of the post he and Sultan were neck and neck, and the grandmother shouted, "Now, Hurricane, don't let

yourself be beaten." As encouragement to him she waved her sunshade high above the heads of the people about her, and when he dashed past the waggon half a head in front, she brought her sunshade down with no light hand on Hester's foot, and then clapped her hands and cried—

"Well done, Hurricane! Hurrah for Rietfontein!" (the name of Frank's farm), with as much energy as any of the boys.

"Hurricane has done well," said Mrs. Turner, now coming to Clare for ready sympathy.

"Yes. I am glad he has not to run a third time to decide it."

"I am so glad he won, for last night nobody seemed to care to have his ticket, and I know nearly everybody thought he had no chance. I wish he had not to be sold. Frank doesn't want to part with him. They are going to put him up, just behind, now."

There was a general scramble to the back of the waggon, from which the bidding was anxiously watched.

Frank bid bravely for his favourite, till his mother cried, "Let him go, Frank;" but the next moment he was knocked down to his owner.

At length Mr. Cairns came to the waggon. "Will you and Lucy be ready to start directly after this next race, Mrs. Dunstan?" he asked. "Clare, I am

glad your colours won the Ladies' Purse. I didn't think Illinois would have come out so well, Christian, did you?"

"No, I never thought much of him before."

"Well, I'm glad for old Gowie to get something at last. It's the first time one of his horses has taken a plate; and it may help to reconcile his wife a little to his running a horse to see the old fellow come home with his little pile of guineas. I believe she doesn't go with his racing at all."

"I have heard so, too."

Hester could not leave the scene without some regret. It was probably the last time she would meet many of the people present whom she knew, and who had been kind to her. As the horses were being harnessed she looked round, impelled by a desire to thank her friends; and she was quite glad that, when they saw she was starting, three or four came up to the cart to have a last word or two and a shake of the hand before it drove off.

## CHAPTER XXV.

### LOOSING THE SILVER CORD.

"WHAT keeps you staring back?" asked Mr. Cairns. "It looks, you know, very much as if you wanted to see somebody come riding on after us. Perhaps you won't mind telling me, just to satisfy my curiosity, how many strings you would like to your bow."

"With pleasure," returned Hester, trying to rise to his banter. "I think one too many."

"Don't you expect me to believe that. Here," giving her the reins, "while I get my pipe lit try which you like best, driving four horses or leading four fellows a dance at once."

"I own to liking to hold four horses in hand, at any rate," said Hester.

"Well, what do you think of our races?" asked Mr. Cairns.

"I think they are very merry, sociable meetings."

"Have you ever been to any before?"

"Yes, when I was a very little girl." But as her childhood was a dangerous subject for Hester, she left the discussion of racing.

"Do we halt here, or make another stage?" asked Mr. Cairns, as they came in sight of the first inn.

"I vote for staying here," said Mrs. Dunstan.

"Then here we stay. I won't deprive you of the glory of making the dash up to the door, Lucy. It's a beastly hole for ladies to stop in. They are ten times as well off in the veldt if they have only a waggon to get into."

The inn did not look so bad outside. It was well-whitened, and had a few American aloes around it; but, as Hester entered, she thought she saw a tipsy man lying in the corner of the verandah. Mr. Cairns, however, informed her that it was only a dumb jockey tossed aside till it was required again.

"Kelly isn't home, for a certainty. He has run two horses to-day. You may bet your grandmother's bones, if there is a race anywhere about he will be there. I don't know that it matters much. I dare say his wife knows how to charge, and that is the only thing they know how to do here. I am not a man to grumble at spending my money, but I do like to have something decent in return for it."

The room into which they entered was decorated

with a Zulu shield and a few rusty assegais, with stuffed birds and beasts in various stages of preservation. At one end and against the wall was fixed the masterpiece of the collection, a stuffed monkey with a necklace of coloured hens' eggs. Hester was glad to find that they were not expected to sit in this room; although the one they had was even more stifling and hotter. The walls were bare, guiltless even of an atrocious paper. It required some little contrivance to find three seats that would bear the weight of a person on them.

However, there was an old piano, which helped them to get through the evening; and after Mr. Cairns had been to have his nightly pipe on the verandah, he brought in two or three young men who had also come back from the races.

One of them boldly proposed a dance, and generously offered to play a waltz for the first if Hester would consent to take him for her second partner. But Hester did not care for dancing under the circumstances, so they had to content themselves with music and singing.

"Well, Mrs. Dunstan, you want to make an early start, don't you? I think I shall turn in," said Mr. Cairns, at last.

"I suppose you are driving?" said one of the others to Hester. "It's a nuisance. It will be pleasant riding in the morning."

"Yes, I wish I was riding, Mr. Craven. I always like it better than driving."

"I suppose you haven't your habit?" said Mr. Cairns.

"I never go away for a night without my habit and an evening dress," replied Hester.

"Well, then, one of these fellows will change places with you, of course, for a few miles. The saddle doesn't matter: you can throw the stirrup across your knee, and ride like that well enough."

Upon this a horse was volunteered, and accepted with pleasure by Hester.

The next day the party started in the glorious freshness of the early morning. There is no other freshness exactly like it—none that thrills and exhilarates in the same way. The inches of dust on the road, the iron roofs, and the long spikes of the American aloes, seem out of place in the light cool air which stirs your horse into vigour as it stirs your active enjoyment. Colours are more subdued, distances not so clearly defined, the glare on hill and plain less intense.

For some miles the journey was across a dull plain, bounded by high ridges covered thickly with brushwood.

The sun had not yet begun to beat upon them with fierceness when they approached one of these ridges,

and began to wind their way in and out between the hills.

"I have heard somebody say this country is the rubbish heap of the world," said Hester. "If those great cones are Nature's waste, she has been kind enough to make them sightly, hasn't she?" and she pointed to the creepers and cacti that clung about the great rocks above, and to the denser wealth of the shrubs that brightened the clefts below.

"You like our country?" asked one of her companions. "Some of the English ladies are never tired of abusing it."

"It certainly has a charm of its own. I don't mean to say I prefer it to anything else I ever saw, but its simple difference is quite enough to please me very often. There is plenty of breathing-room, and I like that."

They were cantering along a cut road which curved round the side of a very steep hill, and were equally distant from its top and base.

"Do you see that ox up there? It's in rather a dangerous position," said Hester's companion, pointing to a beast standing on an overhanging piece of rock ahead.

"Yes. Just as it is, getting the sky for a background, it looks like the pictures of the golden calf. Listen! that is the shout of a baboon, isn't it?"

"Yes; there are generally some to be seen about

here. There they go! That old leader is a fine fellow, isn't he?"

The troop crossed the road and ran up the hill above. An exclamation of dismay broke from Hester a moment later.

The ox, startled by the sudden approach of the baboons, jumped from his pedestal of rock to a spot beyond, where the loose stones gave way beneath him, and he came rolling down to the roadway just as the cart was driving up to the place.

What followed seemed the work of an instant. With one bound the leaders, maddened with fright, left the road and sprang into the depth below, dragging the wheelers and cart after them. The growth was too thick for them to be pulled far, but the cart was upset at once.

"You had better wait here, Miss Dunstan," said Mr. Craven to Hester, as he urged his horse to gallop the thirty yards between them and the place of the accident. But she kept at his side, and they arrived together.

Hester's first thought, after a moment of intense general excitement and anxiety, was of the man who had taken her place. She wondered with a terrible thrill if he was killed, and if so, how would things have been solved for her if she had driven instead of him. But she soon saw him struggling to his feet, his face scratched, but apparently not much hurt.

She sprang from her horse and scrambled down to the cart.

Mr. Cairns was just rising, sitting up, half conscious. The sight of what had happened soon effectually aroused him.

"Cut the horses loose," he cried, "before they all kill themselves. Haven't any of you a bullet to put into that poor devil and put an end to his misery? My arm here is broken, so I am afraid I can't help you much."

The work was speedy. While two men got Mrs. Dunstan from under the wreck of the cart, a third drew his revolver, and the sharp ring of the shot echoed among the hills.

"Are you much hurt?" asked Hester, kneeling beside her friend.

A groan was her only reply.

"I will ride on to Brewster's, and tell them to send a cart out for you; and then I will go on to Grahamstown and send out a doctor," said one of the riding party; and the next minute he was galloping ahead.

Mr. Cairns's arm was bound up in splints made from the laths of his shattered cart-tent, and water was got from the nearest hole; and Hester sat doing her best to keep the sun off Mrs. Dunstan, till she could scarcely hold up her arm any longer.

At last the cart and more help arrived, and the

still unconscious lady was moved to the nearest house.

For three days Hester watched the struggle between life and death, able to do but little, yet thanking God in her heart that she was there to do that little—that the place which years of love had given her had not to be filled by a stranger, though Mrs. Dunstan herself would not have known the difference.

Mrs. Cairns came, anxious, too, to be of use to her dying aunt, and full of sympathy towards Hester herself.

And indeed Hester might well be pitied on the morning when all was over. She stood on the vine-screened verandah and gazed at the mists rolling back from the hills around.

Between her and a kranz that towered in front two hundred yards away was a gentle slope, down which some horses were quietly going to drink at the dam, as if the monotony of life could not be broken even by death. The kids were already rioting around the house as if their racing were the end of all things.

Again she felt completely alone. She had known before that there was unquestioning affection always awaiting her in Mrs. Dunstan's heart whenever she chose to claim it. That fountain, too, was dry, and let her thirst be as terrible as it could be, she could no more slake it there.

Presently Mr. and Mrs. Cairns came from the house and stood near her. "Jan is going home with a note to the girls," said Mrs. Cairns. "Shall I ask Clare to go up to the Cottage and have your things brought over to our house? or would you rather have them left till we get back, and have them moved yourself? I am sure Clare will not mind doing it in the least if you will let her."

"I don't think it worth while to move them at all, thank you," said Hester.

"You can't stay on at the Cottage alone," said Mr. Cairns, decidedly. "We could not think of letting you do that. You had better make our house your home, at any rate for the time, till matters are a little settled. I suppose you know that you need not disturb yourself about how you are to find yourself in boots and bonnets?"

"I have not thought anything about it," said Hester, wearily. "I have enough money for my wants at present. The passage-money to England is not quite £40, I think."

"England! What does it matter what the passage-money to England is!" exclaimed Mr. Cairns.

"You surely don't think of wandering off alone?" protested Mrs. Cairns.

Hester thought of how she had started, a girl of sixteen, on a much longer voyage.

"Yes; I mean to go in a week or two."

"You won't enjoy it all by yourself, in a strange country with no friends. People don't fall together so easily in England as they do in the colonies, either, I have always heard," said Mr. Cairns. "But you will give it up for the time. Perhaps we could get some one to take the girls over after a few months, and then you could all go together; and that would be something like it. Mrs. Dunstan has left you fifteen hundred pounds, I know. She told me so soon after she came over."

"Has she? I did not know it. She was always very good to me," said Hester, feeling that she was almost ungrateful not to be more glad; but ways and means did not assume an important place in her thoughts just then. "But that does not make any difference to my intentions. I must go to England. I have relations there."

"That's a different thing, of course," said Mr. Cairns. "Still, I can tell you I don't believe people are always glad to find unknown relations drop in upon them from the colonies—at any rate unless they bring a beautiful pile with them."

"Have you ever seen any of them?" asked Mrs. Cairns.

"Yes; I know them."

"Then I shall feel more comfortable about your going. But we can talk it over again. You cannot go by the next mail, at least."

## CHAPTER XXVI.

### HOME, SWEET HOME!

"Oh, take me to the land I love,
Once more before I die!
Oh, let me breathe my native air,
And see my native sky!"



ESTER did not go by the next mail, but a fortnight later she was kissing Clare on board a homeward-bound steamer.

"Good-bye, good-bye," said Clare; "you must come and see us again some day," as they parted, and she was hurried with her friends to the tug.

A cheer, a last waving of handkerchiefs, a shuddering throb from the screw, and the great ship bore away from the land of perpetual sunshine.

Homeward bound! Was it possible that she,

Hester Carnsew, the girl who had fled solitary and in anguish, was now returning? The possibility of consequences flashed upon her, but she gave the thought no room. The step was taken, and she would not look back.

During the voyage she seemed to herself to be two people—one taking her place in the little world on board, the other looking on with a curious watchfulness at her own doings and the petty life around.

When the vessel was cutting her way through the sapphire billows of the heaving Atlantic, she would sit and dream of the time when she had watched the breakers roll in at her feet, and the longing to stand again on English ground would grow so intense that she would almost doubt if it was to be, even now. Life was worth living merely to do that again. Then a dread would seize her lest she should die or the ship be wrecked, and so her dream should never come to pass.

She would not go on to Southampton; she would land as soon as it was possible. She had not liked Plymouth when she was a girl; but now she felt that it would be more welcome to her than the town which was a stranger to her.

She left the ship in the night, but the grey dawn broke before she had got her luggage through the custom-house. Very strange was the familiar look of the streets and the names that everywhere caught

her eye as she walked to the hotel. The shops were all shut, "the very houses seemed asleep." The lightest possible dampness descended on everything. "Real Plymouth weather," she thought, with something of satisfaction, though she was no lover of mists.

She could not get her breakfast till half-past seven; and as she could not sit down calmly and wait for it, she went out again.

Up the silent streets to the Hoe. The only person she met was a solitary policeman. The last time she had been there Joan and Philip had been with her, the band was playing, and many people were moving and talking. Now she had the place to herself; but there lay the Sound unchanged beneath her, with its breakwater and lighthouse; and there rose Drake's Island, calling to her mind even then the valiant deeds of men of Devon; and there were the woods of Mount Edgecumbe, lovely in a hundred hues of the fresh spring. These things had not changed, and they welcomed her. Yet they were of the sweet softness of the southern coast, and she longed for the rush of an Atlantic breeze and the roar of the foaming waves as they dashed themselves one after another into the rocky caverns of an iron-bound shore.

The place where she was born was within fifty miles of her—her home! The time it would take

to whirl her there could almost be counted by minutes instead of hours. She turned her back upon the sea, and with eager eyes tried to trace the path of the railway across the country. Did her people feel that she was near them? Did any foam reach them from that wave of excitement which was beating on her? Could they be all leisurely in bed this morning as if it were the same as every other morning? As she went back to the hotel she did not know where she was going next, whether the train would carry her north or south. She wondered where she should spend the evening, as if the forces at work were outside her control. She had her ticket for London, but that was nothing. Yet it was an even more trifling circumstance which swayed her when she reached the station still in indecision. Her luggage was addressed for London, and with a sense of keen disappointment she got into a carriage for Paddington. She had the compartment to herself, and, as the express rushed from the station, shed as bitter tears as her first separation from Caervean had ever cost her. She had looked upon her country afar off—that was all! Why had she ever come back to England? Had it never struck her before that she would be giving herself the pains of Tantalus? She could surely have carried out her work as well somewhere else.

After a while she tried to occupy her mind in

thinking over her position. Would it be possible to do the work she meant to do without references? She had not thought of that either till now. And how should she manage so as to lose all her identity? She certainly did not want any one from the Cape to be able to trace her. She would write to Mrs. Cairns telling her of her safe arrival, but would not give any address.

She wondered if it would subject her to any comment to go alone to an hotel. Anyhow, that seemed the only thing to be done at the moment. Then to what hotel should she go? She knew nothing of London. She tried to recall the names of some at which her friends had stayed. She did not know if there were any exclusively for ladies; her father had been in the habit of going to the "Tavistock," which was only for gentlemen—that she remembered. She had heard of a large one at Charing Cross; perhaps she had better go there. It was imperative that she should decide on something. So with her heart shrinking from the encounter of unknown difficulties, but with a calm demeanour, she pointed out her luggage when the train stopped, and ordered to be driven to the Charing Cross Hotel. As the cab rumbled out of the station she leaned forward and looked out of the window, trying to fix her attention on the sights that presented themselves to her view, when an incident happened which effectually

distracted her thoughts from her present position. There was somewhat of a block, and she was looking at the various vehicles that were crowded together as her driver slowly steered his own amongst them. For a moment it was stopped beside a hansom going in the opposite direction. Its occupant, too, was leaning forward, and Hester recognized Bevil Thurstan. It was but for an instant. Her cab moved on, while she, regardless of everything, thrust her head out of the window only to see the hansom glide into the opening behind. She did not want to see anything more during the drive. She asked herself if she was glad or sorry, and she said that she was very glad. She had been close to him; she could have touched him, she believed. It was something to have seen him. He had not noticed her—of that she was quite certain. But could she risk the possibility of another such meeting? She had thought that there would be such small likelihood of its happening, that she had not counted it in her list of accidents; and yet, at the moment she thought she was burying herself in London, she met him face to face.

How should she bear herself under the constant expectation of its happening again? Would it grow to be her constant hope? She could easily find out where he would often be. Was it not possible that, in her craving for the sight of a face she loved, she might be

driven to watching for him? She loathed the idea. It should not become a possibility. At whatever cost to herself, he should be left in peace. She would fly again. There was no rest for the sole of her foot. Like Noah's raven, she must move on and on; there was no abiding-place for her. To America she would go this time; perhaps in some thronged city there she should find her mission.

She would give herself no time to be tempted again. She would go in a few days; but, if she did that, there was one thing she could not deny herself. There was little risk about it, and it would take her out of London, and so away from the chance of meeting Bevil. She could not leave the country again without one glimpse of her home, one attempt at the sight of her people. It was not probable that they would recognize her even if they met. Edwin had not, and he had come into much closer contact with her than any of them would.

She would go to Cornwall the next day, and would not return to London, but go straight to Liverpool.

## CHAPTER XXVII.

### A LOOK FROM PISGAH.

"There did a thousand memories roll upon him,
Unspeakable for sadness. By and by
The ruddy square of comfortable light
Allured him, as the beacon-blaze allures
The bird of passage."

ENOCH ARDEN.

ESTER spent her afternoon in maturing her plan. To go down to Salford without any ostensible purpose would create a mystery, and set the townspeople talking about her at once; but she thought she might pass as an artist. She knew they were regarded as "peculiar," in provincial phrase, and so might do without comment what would not be allowed to pass unnoticed in other persons. So she provided herself with a portable easel and sketching umbrella. In the morning she sent her luggage to

Liverpool, and taking a single portmanteau with her, went south again. Not from Paddington would she start; she would not venture into that part of the great city again, but chose the nearer station and shorter route of the South-Western line.

This time she provided herself with an *Illustrated London News*, a *Spectator*, *Punch*, and the *Daily News*, to be studied on the journey, fearful lest she might find herself driven into conversation during her stay and excite surprise by her utter ignorance of any topic that might have been exciting the public mind for the last week or two. These papers occupied her for a long time, though they did not claim her attention so closely but that she was amused at some of the conversation of her companions. One, evidently a Devonshire man, was extolling the clotted cream of his country; while the other, who was not a west countryman, was no admirer of a delicacy which he protested was too like unripe cheese, though at the same time he was curious to know why the cream could only be made in Devon and Cornwall. The superiority with which the Devonian received this query amused Hester. He elaborately explained that it was not in the pasture or the cows that the distinction lay, but in the people and their way of managing. Hester could have laughed. She knew well enough that, from an economic point, clotted cream was extravagant. Certainly more

butter could be produced from a raw cream dairy; Joan had tried the experiment at Caervean. Then the stranger remarked that probably the Phœnicians had introduced the habit of making clotted cream in their excursions to Cornwall for tin, as it was found that it was made at many of the points where they had traded. This did not suit the other, who could not see why the Phœnicians should not have learnt the art from the Cornish.

Hester was sorry when, in changing lines, she found herself with fresh faces. The west countryman's pride of county had been pleasant to her after her long absence.

She had thought of telegraphing for a carriage to meet her at the station nearest Salford, but put aside the idea lest such an entrance into the town should attract attention, and resigned herself to the ordinary omnibus sent from the principal inn to keep up communication between the little town and the outer world.

The landlady was a widow, the same who had presided over the affairs of the house when Hester had been a child, and not much altered since she had seen her last. Hester was careful to parade her easel and sketching materials at once, and was graciously received, and escorted to a cheerful room with a view of the river and the country beyond.

"Ladies and gentlemen that paint like this room,"

explained the landlady; "they can see the ships come in and go out, so it's always pretty to look at and always lively."

Hester would rather have had a view of the street, but, careful of her artistic reputation, she suppressed a desire to request a change, and asked a few questions instead about the cliffs in the neighbourhood.

Mrs. Farrant had not seen much of the cliff scenery around her. She had lived in Salford all her life, which perhaps accounted for her not being alive to anything particularly beautiful in its surroundings. She had been to "revels" held on the commons by the sea, in some of the country parishes near, when she was a girl; but then she had always found the sports more attractive than the scenery. Now she never left the town—rarely the inn. However, as strangers came on purpose to see the rocks and caves, and universally admired what they had seen, she had become enthusiastic on the natural beauties of the creeks and bays, and not a little personally proud of them. She could tell Hester what piece of rock a gentleman who had occupied this very room had put in his picture, and then when he got back to London he sent it to some exhibition, and she believed the Queen herself had seen it.

"What is the time?" said Hester, looking at her watch, and answering herself. "Six o'clock. It will be too late to begin anything to-night, after I have

had some dinner, but I can have a good walk and look about me."

Her "good walk" was instinctively towards her home, but she did not go straight along the high road to it. Instead of that she struck into a coast-guard's path, and by following the cliffs made her two miles three. It was growing quite dim when she drew near the house itself. She knew every corner and turn of the fields around, and made her way close to it with a tolerably secure feeling of being unobserved.

Every stone, almost every bush, seemed the same; the stunted trees had made no perceptible growth, nor were any gone. The very gates were painted the same colour! How grandly the old house stood in its solitude, with its front cold and grey in the gathering darkness! As she stood looking, lights came and went behind the blinds of the dining-room windows, and presently she saw a single lamp brought into the drawing-room. The blinds were not drawn. She knew the custom well: if any of the family was expected after dark, the blinds were left up that the lights might shine cheerfully as they approached. The servants' entrance was quite away out of hearing, and no one was likely to come out of the front door. She stole to the window and peered cautiously in. The room had three occupants—her father, her aunt, and Joan.

At the first moment when she looked, Joan had risen to move the lamp where it would shine more brightly on the newspaper Mr. Carnsew was reading. Then she placed a screen between it and her aunt, who was dozing, exactly as Hester had so often seen her, with her knitting in her hands.

Her father's face had not changed much.

"He will look young on his death-bed," thought Hester. But his hair was quite white; not a streak of grey could she see in it.

Her aunt looked a feeble old lady, but she had looked much beyond middle-age when Hester left.

It was in Joan that she found the greatest difference. She had left her belonging to the order of young ladies; she saw her now a woman, with lace upon her head, white strokes among her glossy hair, deep lines on her face, and restless eyes which belied the calmness of her movements.

"It is my doing," thought Hester, crushing down a great sob.

She turned her eyes for a moment upon the room itself, which was altered in many little ways. Her coffee-pot was well out of reach on a bracket against the wall. Then she wondered if the blinds were always left up in the evenings now for her, if she should ever come back.

But even as she thought, her ear caught the sound of wheels beyond the gates, and she was forced to

hurry away. From her shelter amongst the trees she could make out that a dog-cart with three men drove up to the house. The one on the back-seat was a servant, who led away the horse as the others entered. The great hall-door slammed heavily behind them, and Hester, wondering if one was Philip —she knew Edwin was still away—crept forward again to try to find out. But Joan herself was closing the drawing-room shutters, and she could get no view.

In a few minutes she became aware that a meal was going on in the dining-room. Shadows moved on the blinds, and mingled voices sounded. She even heard a laugh. She could endure it no longer, and after laying her cheek against the window-pane for an instant, turned and rushed from the spot.

She ran straight down the drive, scarcely caring who saw her or what became of her.



## CHAPTER XXVIII.

### A REPRIEVE.

MRS. Farrant met her as she was going up to her room. "Perhaps you have not heard, ma'am, that there's going to be an anniverary to-morrow at St. Cruden; that's the next parish."

"An anniversary!" echoed Hester. St. Cruden was her parish.

"Yes, ma'am. A church anniversary, of course." Mrs. Farrant, though she might have leanings toward Dissent herself, would have felt it derogatory to the dignity of her visitors to assume that they could belong to anything but the Established Church. "I thought perhaps you might like to know, because the church has been fresh done up lately, and is considered well worth seeing now."

"What kind of seats are there?" asked Hester, remembering the old high pews of her time.

"Oh, nice new ones, all alike. Though I am sure I don't know how Miss Carnsew likes to give up the place she's always been accustomed to, at her time of life."

"At what time are the services to be held?" asked Hester, the idea taking hold of her that she might go unnoticed amongst the crowd of strangers. Their family pew had been in a corner commanding a view of the whole congregation; but if the pews were gone the Caervean people were sure to have one of the front seats assigned to them, so she would be able to see them without their seeing her at all.

"There is a short one at half-past three, then tea at four, and the evening service at seven. We have a nice convenient carriage for taking people about the county in, and Josiah can drive you out if you like, ma'am."

"I will think about it, and let you know what I decide in the morning," replied Hester. The desire to go was very great; she did want to see Philip if he was at home. He was sure not to be at the afternoon service, but then if she wished to see her aunt again she must go to that, for Miss Carnsew would not come out in the evening. So she would have to go to both, and the tea would come between. Could she trust herself to meet the Vigarses? She

knew Joan's dislike to meals in public well enough to be sure that she would not be at the tea; and seeing that Edwin had not known her, surely Mrs. Vigars would not! She would wear her eye-glasses too.

Yes, she would go. If she fancied any one suspected her, she would leave the town the next morning. She would not allow herself to change her mind after a night's rest, but sent a message to Mrs. Farrant to say that she would have the boy and carriage in the afternoon.

The morning found her very excited and nervous, doubtful of the wisdom of her proceedings. She longed to find out what rumours her flight from her home had given rise to, or what was said of her uncle's death, but did not dare to approach either subject in any way.

After breakfast she went out to do some painting, and not being quite sure of the road to a certain little creek of which the landlady had spoken, she asked a lady whom she met, the way.

"You have rather much to carry," said the stranger. "I am only taking a walk. I will help you with your easel, if you will let me."

"I think I ought to have brought a boy with me," said Hester, accepting the offer, and giving up her easel as they walked on together.

In the course of their conversation it transpired that the lady—who Hester immediately decided was

a Miss Whitting, the maiden sister of an ancient lawyer of whom she had heard in her childhood—intended walking to St. Cruden in the afternoon.

Hester said she was going to be driven out herself and offered her a seat, and it was arranged that she should call for her on the way.

So at a quarter past three Josiah drove up with Hester and Miss Whitting to the village inn, and then received instructions to be in waiting with the sketching materials at half-past four, as Hester did not wish to have to loiter around with nothing to do from then till seven o'clock.

Miss Whitting was anxious to inspect the decorations of the church, but Hester did not wish to enter till later, and her acquaintance promised to keep a seat next her own for her.

Hester went into the churchyard, and soon made her way to the corner where the Carnsews lay. There was but one fresh mound, lying at a little distance from the one above her mother. She stood sadly by it, and then tenderly plucked up a tiny weed or two that had appeared among the flowers.

"I suppose in old superstitious times everything here ought to have blackened or turned to dust under my touch. May God forgive me this miserable deed," she said to herself.

She did not venture to linger long at that spot, for it was almost close to the little gate by which

the Caervean people entered the churchyard. She moved away, and waited beside an ancient tomb where she was partially screened by a tree-trunk, and soon after she saw her sister and aunt walk slowly down the path and go into the church.

Miss Carnsew was leaning upon Joan's arm, and went feebly along. They were silent, which was a bitter disappointment to Hester, who was longing for the sound of their voices. She followed them into the church, and, as she had calculated, found them seated well up the building several seats in front of Miss Whitting.

Hester thought that if she had been brought blindfolded to the church, and then allowed the use of her eyes, she should not have known where she was, but rather have fancied she was having a fantastic dream. The shape was the same as of old; the pillars, and arches that sprang from them, were unaltered; but that was nearly all that remained except the pieces of old oak used again in the roof, and the curiously carved bosses that had been the greatest astonishment of her childhood.

She wondered, too, as Mrs. Farrant had done, how her aunt had liked to descend from the sheltered ease of her roomy square pew to an open seat in the body of the building.

The service was soon over, and she left the church with the first crush, in time to watch Joan and

Miss Carnsew go up the path towards Caervean. Miss Whitting carried her off at once to the schoolroom, to have tea while the tables were fresh and there was no doubt about the teacups. That was but the employment of ten minutes, and then she found, somewhat to her alarm, that she was to be the recipient of some attention from both the vicar and his wife.

Miss Whitting had found occasion to speak of her to Mrs. Vigars as an artist who was staying at Salford, and now brought them up for introduction.

Hester was thankful that her last night's walk had given her a cold and partially taken away her voice.

Mr. Vigars smiled upon her such a particularly interested smile, that, had she not known his habits, she might have been excused for thinking that the pleasure of his life was really increased by the chance meeting.

"Miss Whitting tells me you are an artist," said Mrs. Vigars, cheerfully welcoming the stranger, who was a striking-looking woman and faultlessly apparelled, to her festivities. "The scenery in this neighbourhood is very romantic, isn't it?"

"Yes," assented Hester. "But I cannot claim to be a professional artist; I am only an amateur. I have never sold a picture, and shall probably never try to sell one."

Hester said this with some little design beyond

expressing the truth. She knew that though Mrs. Vigars might have somewhat of respect for genius, she had reverence for money, and to paint and not sell your pictures would probably rank much higher with her than to paint as a means of livelihood.

"Ah," said the vicar, "it must be delightful to be able to follow the bent of one's tastes, untrammeled by money cares. That necessity for making money is so apt to cloy genius, and pervert its course into the channels most likely to reach public opinion."

"Then you don't think the cry of the million is to be trusted?"

Mr. Vigars shook his head with another smile. "It is well to have the means to be independent of such cries, at all events, and a subject for which we ought to be *thankful*."

"How did you like the church? Did you notice our altar frontal?" asked Mrs. Vigars.

"No, I was too far off to see it particularly."

"You must really get a look at it this evening. The design is most lovely, and the work too. And this is so curious about it—it has the lilies and crown, the emblems of the blessed Virgin. Of course, the blessed Virgin was descended from the root of Jesse, and the frontal was worked for us by a young lady called Jessie—so she was particularly fitted for the work."

Hester thought the idea very far-fetched, and could

not assent to Mrs. Vigars's remark, so she opportunely spied Josiah with her camp-stool and easel.

"Here is the boy with my belongings," she said. "I hope to do a little work before seven o'clock."

"Are you going to make a sketch of the church? I think it has been rather overlooked by artists. I don't remember any one's sketching it."

"I thought of trying some rocks I have heard of at Caervean Bay," said Hester. "I prefer natural beauties to architectural designs."

"But there is always something so very interesting about a church."

"Yes, so there is about your cliffs," said Hester, decidedly; and with Josiah to carry her heavy appliances she departed for the bay.

She felt almost indignant with her guide for taking her by a private road of her father's for a part of the way. He, however, seemed to take it for granted that a stranger would wish to get as near a view of the house as was possible without going straight up to it, and he explained to her that he didn't suppose Mr. Carnsew would mind if he knew she was from London—a circumstance which failed to strike Hester forcibly, but appeared to Josiah to greatly mitigate the offence of trespassing. Hester strongly suspected, however, that the boy only wanted to go the shortest way to get back the sooner to his crowd of acquaintances at the village.

He led her down the little path which she had so often used, and pointed out a group of rocks close by as the ones Mrs. Farrant had spoken of.

Hester then dismissed him, and said she would carry back her own things.

She wandered a hundred yards peering into each hole and crevice. How strangely familiar every foot of rock was to her. She went to look if the little store of stones and shells that she had collected for the grotto were gone from their hiding-place, and she found them still there. She took them out and spread them before her, handling them curiously as if they were relics from some previous existence. Then she scattered them around her on the sand, and turned back again.

What she longed to do was to ramble around in her old haunts, but she dared not start on such an expedition. On the beach at least she was on free-footing, but if once she mounted the cliff she was on debatable ground. So she sat down impatiently at her easel, and sketched in the outlines of one great rock that rose before her.

Her visit she felt must be one of disappointment: whatever she got she would feel that she wanted more, and she already felt as if she could not tear herself from the spot.

What did she hear! Her heart beat violently. She was sure she heard voices! Where were they?

On the cliff, she thought. Yes, they grew more distinct. The people must pass just above her. They were men's voices: one she thought was Philip's.

"You really mean to be off again!" she heard in a surprised tone.

Then she grew deadly cold as she caught the man's voice which replied. It was Bevil Thurstan's. "Yes. I can catch the mail easily on Friday at Dartmouth."

"Well, I won't ask you what takes you away again just as soon as you have come back. I remember Edwin told us he thought it would go hard with you if you could not get some pretty girl out there to smile upon you. I shall miss you. But there, you might as well be married at once, as flying over the world like this. Shall I never see a bachelor of fourscore again!"

"That speech of Benedict's was the prelude to his own loss of freedom, I request you to take notice."

They were coming down the path. Hester tried to recall her wits. She could not run away or conceal herself. If she lowered her great umbrella, might it not screen her till they had passed? She rose and unfastened it, standing with it partly closed in her hand.

To her horror Bevil came straight towards her and said, "Shall I fix your umbrella for you? It is troublesome, isn't it? There is generally a little wind here."

All attempt at concealment was impossible now, Hester thought, and she dropped her umbrella.

"What is the matter?" demanded Philip, staring at his friend's astonished look.

"For God's sake, Carnsew, walk on and leave me to speak to this lady alone."

"Certainly," and Philip plodded forward across the heavy sand, leaving them facing each other on the spot where they had first met.

For a moment neither spoke, and Hester saw her brother moving away as her uncle had done the last day she had stood between those rocks and the sea.

"How did you come here?" asked Bevil.

"The way is easy enough. Perhaps you mean," she answered hastily, with white lips, "*why* did you come? Indeed you must not believe I want to worry you. I did not mean to see you at all, and I will leave the country and trouble you no more, before the end of the week."

"Not if I can prevent it," he said.

For an instant she thought he was threatening her, but only for a moment.

"How can you prevent me, and why should you?"

"I have something to say to you. Shall I do it here, or come to you where you are staying?"

"Oh, I had better hear it at once, if it is anything I must," she said, anxiously.

"Well then, in the first place, I know your name. It is Hester Carnsew."

"Ah!" cried Hester, eagerly. "You have not told my people? You will not tell them?" she pleaded.

"I have not told them," he said, quietly.

"You see there was no need to be jealous of Edwin," she said.

"I never was. I knew at the time that though you might seem more familiar with him, your feeling for me was quite different. Before I promise not to tell your people who you are, you must hear something more that I have to say. I was going out to the Cape again to tell it to you; I should have sailed on Friday. I do not want to say it too hurriedly. Are you sure you can bear to hear something at which you will rejoice—which will make you more glad than you ever thought to be again?"

"I can bear anything you have to tell me. But I don't believe there is any possibility of making me *very* glad. Though I do not mind having come over so much, now that it has saved you the trouble of a useless journey to South Africa," said Hester, wildly excited.

"I am half afraid of the responsibility," said Bevil, nervously; "but there is no one else to do it."

"I cannot bear waiting, patiently," said Hester.

"I made a guess at your name before I left you," he began, rather slowly. "I must have seen it some-

where about here, I think, and when you said you were called Hester, something Edwin once said about you recurred to me, and I thought you might be his sister. After I had been home a week or two, I determined to come down here and find out if my idea was a correct one. I came here the day before yesterday. Why you must have been in England then!"

"Yes. We met in London on that day."

"Did we? I would have sworn that I should have known you anywhere."

"You never saw me at all. How did you prove to your satisfaction that I was Hester Carnsew?"

"I spent yesterday morning over your affairs. I made friends with Mr. Vigars, and got him to give me a look for curious lore in the registers. There of course I found your baptism. There I found too, the date of your uncle's death. It occurred to me then that it was the very day that I was here. Hester, you know I saw your parting from that old man there on those low rocks."

"Yes, of course. I remember."

"I would not mention you to Mr. Vigars, but I did speak of Mr. Carnsew, and what do you think I learnt? That his death *was* the result of an accident. That you, my darling, had nothing to do with it. He never got home from that walk alive. He slipped and fell on those rocks, and was killed on the spot. Some one saw it happen."

She stared at him in doubt for an instant.

"It is the truth, as I stand here before God."

She gave a low sharp cry, her brain reeled, sky and sea rushed together before her eyes, the fear of death came upon her, she faintly heard a shout to her brother for help, and then all was a blank.

## CHAPTER XXIX.

### IN HAVEN.

"Mine through sunshine, storm, and snows,
Let fate frown on so we love and part not;
'Tis life where thou art, 'tis death where thou art not."

MOORE.

HOW pleasantly the rooks were cawing! Hester was sure, too, that the sun was shining in glory upon the sea; she could even catch the shimmering by the side of the blind. What could have made her forget to draw up her blind the night before! She never remembered doing it in her life. It was funny, too, that she felt too lazy to jump out of bed now and pull it up. And was there something wrong with her eyes this morning, that her room itself looked faded? The paper and the little calendar fastened against the wall—the 18th of June! Surely something was to

happen to-day. That date had been impressed upon her mind for some reason, she was convinced. The 18th of June. Well, she could not remember. That must settle itself too. Wasn't that a miserable little nightlight over on the table? She was quite sure she never put it there herself—she hated a light in her room. She must have been ill! Had she been nearly drowned while bathing? That was the most likely thing to have happened to her. She languidly lifted her left hand to push her hair from her face, and as the sleeve of her nightdress hung back, her eyes fell on a bracelet clasped round her arm.

How came she to have on that bracelet? It was of tigers' claws mounted in gold. Where had she got it? What was there about it? She had a struggling recollection of having resisted its being taken off her arm, which excited her even now. No one *should* take it off but herself, and with her other hand she fumbled at the clasp and undid it. She laid it on the bed, and then, with a sigh of relief after the exertion, dropped asleep again.

When she awoke an hour later Joan was softly moving about, and the nightlight was gone.

"Joan," she said, and was startled at the weakness of her voice and the age of the face that instantly turned to her, "I feel like Mark Twain's jumping frog must have done after he had swallowed the shot. I haven't any go left in me. I suppose I have been ill?"

"Yes, Hester dear, very ill. But you will soon be better, I hope, now that you can joke again."

"I don't think there is any joke about it. What has happened to me?"

"Never mind that now. All you have to think about is getting strong again."

But Hester did think. Shamblingly and lazily, perhaps, but still she tried to remember. Her hand rested on her bracelet, and that stirred her thoughts. What was it that tried so hard to come back to her and she wanted so much to lay hold of, but could not grasp? "Joan," she said at length, "I wonder if I have had an awful nightmare?"

"If I had had, I should try to forget it," replied Joan.

"But I can't forget it. It gets more and more distinct," said Hester. "Tell me, Joan, have I always lived here?"

"Hester, darling, you must not let such thoughts trouble you," protested Joan, in great distress.

"It is true then—it is no dream?" said Hester, with a great effort trying to draw the counterpane over her head.

"Hester, Hester! it is all over now. You are safe with us again," cried Joan, bending over her and kissing her. "You had always a strong will; try to exert it now. You will make yourself very ill again if you excite your mind too much. It is

brain fever that you have been suffering from. Now I will read something to you, and do try to attend to what I am saying."

But Hester could not attend. Piece by piece the incidents of her exile returned to her, and as Joan read she shaped her story on to the very end. The end! Ah, well, the end was a relief—a mercy. Here she was again in her father's house too. That was something in itself to be thankful for.

"Joan," she asked, unconsciously interrupting her sister in the middle of a sentence, "what has become of Mr. Thurstan?"

Joan closed her book in despair. "He is here, Hester. You may be sure that he has not left Caervean while you were so ill as you have been."

"I will go to sleep, Joan. I am tired."

"You must have something first. Wouldn't you like some milk?"

"I don't care."

"That is a sign you are better," said Joan, cheerily. "You don't like to be worried."

The days glided by. Joan spent most of her time in Hester's room, and read aloud or talked. Hester was surprised to find how much she had to say, for she had never been a great talker. Now it was an acute pleasure merely to listen to her chatting about all the people they had known, and of Mary's life and children. And there was the extra pleasure of

speaking of Edwin. Hester had seen him last and had much to say of him, while Joan brought out the necklace he had had made for her and showed it to Hester.

And little by little Hester told her what her life away had been, and they discoursed upon New Zealand and Africa for hours.

Aunt Emily was admitted sometimes for a little while, but as she always showed a tendency to weep at sight of Hester, Joan did not care for her to stay long. Mr. Carnsew and Philip, too, would come for half an hour.

At length Joan brought the news that Hester might be taken into the sitting-room.

"You are not so heavy, Hester, as you were when I used to try to haul you about with one arm," said Philip, as he picked her lightly up in his arms.

"I thought it was bones that weighed most," said Hester, "and I seem to have plenty of them still."

"I hope you haven't left all the energy you used to have behind you in those hot places you have chosen to live in," said her brother.

Bevil was standing holding open the sitting-room door for them to pass in.

Hester smiled as they passed. "Ask Mr. Thurstan. He has known me there quite lately."

"You certainly had not reached the languid stage then."

"I am glad to hear it," said Philip. "Though I am afraid we shall never ride double again. I suppose, old woman, we rattled you around till you got more independent than any boy to be met with!"

He placed her on the sofa, and drew it where she could see through the window. "There will be a cup of tea for me, Joan, if I turn up about five?"

He closed the door behind himself, and Joan sat down by the sofa. Hester looked round the room. It was here that she had spent so many happy and anxious hours. Nothing was changed in it but the people. The same chairs and pictures, cushions and brackets, were about. The mandarin still walked across the screen, and the oval mirror still rested above the mantelshelf. Outside, too, the view was unaltered. The deep blue of the Atlantic, with the rocks and tiny islands standing in bold relief, beating back the waves in spray as fine as steam—everything was familiar to her sight. Hester moved her head to rest against Joan's arm, and gazed awhile at the sea.

"Joan, I don't know what you will think of it, but I cannot live here. It is home, but I cannot rest in it. I know I shall be obliged to move away again. I hope you will not think me miserably ungrateful to you, but I cannot take up the old life where I left it, and go calmly on as if these years were altogether a blank. Perhaps I need not give you all up again. At all events we can write to each other.

I wonder if I could be of any use to Edwin out in India?"

"If you cannot rest in England, we will wander together till you can," said Bevil, coming forward before Joan could reply. "You thought I had gone out with Philip? I only waited to give you a little rest after your move. Miss Carnsew, will you trust your sister to me for a quarter of an hour? I promise not to excite her more than I can help."

"I do not think you will do her any harm," said Joan, rising; and Bevil took her seat.

"You have been very good to me to stay here while I was so ill," said Hester. "I don't believe I should have got better so fast if I had not known you were in the house."

"I could not go away, Hester, when your life hung on a thread from hour to hour; and then when you began to recover I waited on for this day. I am glad they did not cut off your hair, dearest. It reminds me now of my first visit to your house in South Africa. Do you remember?—the day we gathered figs together."

"Yes, I remember. I was cross that day."

"Were you? My memory has not held that——"

"Tell me," said Hester, with some energy, "what has become of Samuel Truscott? I have wanted to ask Joan, but somehow I could not do it, and she has never mentioned him to me."

"Mr. Truscott? I think he lives about eight miles away. I saw him once when I was at an agricultural show at Salford with Philip. Why do you ask?"

"I was once afraid Joan would have to marry him."

"Joan! Your sister! Impossible. She could never have done such a thing."

"No, I see now, she never could. I hope I shall never see him again."

"Now about this rambling fit, Hester. Let us get married as soon as you get a little stronger, and then we will go where you like—you shall choose your own ground. I should like us to spend Christmas at my home in Yorkshire; but you will see how you feel about it by that time, and you shall do exactly as you please. Gradually you will settle down to a home life once more, and till that time I will be at your right hand."

"I thought," said Hester, "that we had decided there could be no question of marriage. Where is the difference in our positions now?"

"Hester, do you recollect distinctly all that took place before you were taken ill?"

"Yes, I believe I do. You came to me on the beach. I don't know what I said or did, but I know what you did. But though my sin had mercifully no result except indirectly, my intention remains unaltered."

"I have not forgotten it, and I make no attempt

to condone your fault. Yet who amongst us has not been tempted, and yielded to the temptation? I don't want to say that crime consists in being found out. You know I don't think so. But you yourself must feel how different your position is from what you supposed it to be. As you stood, there were many things to be considered besides our mutual will. Now the case is otherwise. I know you are bitterly sorry for what you did, and I believe you will make me as good a wife as I shall ever find, and will carry out your duties as well as any woman I know—possibly better, for gold cannot be tried in the fire without coming out refined. The matter now stands between you and me. No one but ourselves and Joan knows the real reason why you went away. Your father thinks it was simply a mad freak on your part, and so does your aunt. In short, if you will trust yourself to me, I have no fear or hesitation about the step we are taking."

"Will you give me two or three weeks to decide in? I am weak now, and perhaps not able to judge as clearly as I ought."

"I will give you no time at all. I am not weak, and I will judge for us both. My life will be incomplete without you by me, and if you go off alone again, you will wander aimlessly about till some accident ends your life, or you will die worn out with helpless longing for what you have not."

"I have sometimes thought it would not take long," she said, holding up her thin hands; and he knew she had given way.

THE END.

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